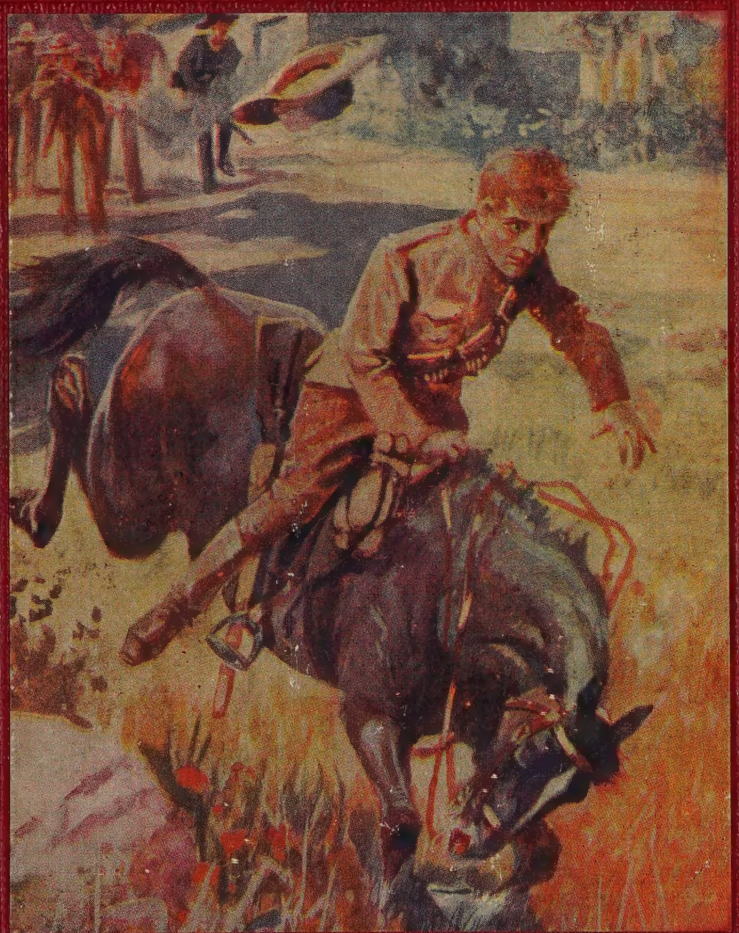
THE THREE SCOUTS



WILLESDEN

EDUCATION COMMITTEE.

PRIZE

AWARDED TO

Frank Spreadbury

Christmas 1914.

Signed Chas. W. Wreford
Head Teacher.

Church Lane Brondesbury School.

Boys' Department.

M. & S., LONDON.

THE THREE SCOUTS

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THE THREE SCOUTS

CHAPTER I

LOVE AND DUTY

THE shadow of war lay like a black cloud over the southern portion of the great African continent. There was both depression and elation at Johannesburg at the prospect of fighting—perhaps equally divided; but among those who regarded the future with unmixed feelings of delight were two brothers, Geoff and Bernard (generally known as "Bunny") Bigby, aged respectively twenty and eighteen. Of these, Geoff was at this time quite an old stager in the Boer country, having left his English school four years since in order to join his father, who had lived in and helped to create Johannesburg almost from the first moment of its uprising from the wonderful

gold-earth upon which it stands. His children had been born at Cape Town, but Mr. Bigby had moved with his family to the goldfields, foreseeing profitable employment there. He was an engineer of some standing, and had done well in the country of his adoption—so well, indeed, that he had judged it to be the wisest and best thing he could do for both Geoff and Bernard to allow them to follow his example and make their career—if they could—in the place which had proved a profitable residence for himself.

Thus Geoff—the elder of the two brothers—had already lived in Johannesburg four years, while Bunny, having remained at Cubberly School for two years after the departure of his brother, left that educational centre for South Africa about two years since.

By a strange concatenation of circumstances it fell out that a schoolfellow of theirs—another Cubberly boy—had drifted to the golden city as well as Geoff and Bunny Bigby. This was one Guy Bunsen, Geoff's opponent in the Cubberly days in many a classical encounter behind the fives courts.

Bunsen had come to Johannesburg but re-

cently, scarcely a year before this time, and had certainly not done so for the pleasure of meeting his old friend, or enemy, there; as a matter of fact, he hated the Bigbys with all his soul. He had failed in his efforts to pass those examinations, military or other, for which he had been specially trained; after which he tried indigo-planting in India for a short while, but had reappeared at his father's house quite unexpectedly, scarcely a year after his departure, under mysterious circumstances, — including something more than a misunderstanding with his employers,—which were never fully explained. After this misfire he had "sampled," as he called it, mercantile work in the city of London, but had soon dropped it; he had then attempted to learn farming with an enterprising farmer who advertised for pupils, but did not stay long in his Wiltshire home, where, it is believed, his departure was a distinct relief to those who had for a time been his companions. Finally, he had come to Johannesburg "to find employment," and here—since his father wisely refused to keep him longer in idleness—he was obliged to work for a living, though he would have greatly preferred to

find it without working—and became employed as a clerk in one of the banks at a salary just about sufficient to keep body and soul together.

War was not yet declared, though everyone knew that the declaration could not now be long delayed. Many of the English inhabitants of Johannesburg had already made the necessary arrangements and departed. The elder Mr. Bigby was away at Kimberley on business, but his wife and sons had received their instructions to remain, if possible, until the last moment; for Mr. Bigby was an optimist, and though he believed that war would necessarily, in the end, greatly improve the status of English residents in the Transvaal,—"Uitlanders" or "Outlanders," as the Boers called them,—he still hoped that so serious a step might somehow be avoided.

But the outlook grew blacker and blacker, and Geoff had little doubt that within a few days it would become necessary for him to lock up everything lock-upable here, and take his departure, together with his mother and Bunny, for the South.

"And then! hey for a share in reckoning with

the rascals!" said Bunny joyously. "Jove, Geoff, we've something to wipe off, eh? My fingers itch to punch a few Boer heads—the beggars grow more impudent every day. I can scarcely keep my hands off them!"

"Yes, it will be fine," said Geoff, "and yet"— Geoff did not finish his sentence. The fact was that, now his departure had become so imminent, Geoff had realised that there were circumstances, or rather *a* circumstance, which would throw a shadow over the otherwise unclouded prospect of delight which the approaching war seemed to offer.

The "circumstance" in question was nothing less than a very charming girl, so charming—in spite of the fact that she was a Boer girl—that he must not altogether be blamed for his unfortunate frame of mind. This was the daughter of a rich Dutch banker—a very highly-respected burgher, and member of the Raad, or Council of State. If Geoff had not been faced by the sudden necessity of leaving the town, it is possible that he would not have become aware just yet that he was in love; but the prospect of imminent separation opened his eyes to the lamentable fact.

It was, therefore, with a somewhat heavy heart that he turned his steps one afternoon, shortly before the declaration of war, towards the house of Burgher van Krygkraft, the father of the fair Vesta van Krygkraft. He had determined, since this was the last time he would see her, or nearly the last, to say something which would at least reveal to her something of the state of affairs at present existing within his bosom. Vesta was alone in the drawing-room. She looked pleased when he entered, which was encouraging.

"I've come to say good-bye, Vesta," said Geoff. "I'm afraid it's all up—we shall have to go—my mother and we."

"Yes," said Vesta; "I think there will be war: it is God's will."

"When it is over you will hate all things English," continued Geoff; "and that will be a great calamity."

"But why should it be so?" said Vesta. "My father, as you know, is a good friend of the English; if it depended upon my father there would be no war. I shall not hate that which is English any more afterwards than now."

"I am glad of that," said Geoff faintly, "because I"— he paused, unable to finish what he wished to say, which was something to the effect that he would like Vesta to remember him rather particularly when he was away.

"And you intend to volunteer, and will fight against my people?" sighed Vesta. "It is very sad! I suppose I ought to wish you ill; but, on the contrary, I say, God keep you from all harm!"

"Thank you," said Geoff. "Of course, I shall volunteer—I should be a cad if I didn't do that; since England is fighting for us Outlanders and our rights, it is the least we can do to lend a hand."

"That is true—I am not so narrow-minded that I do not see it," said Vesta; "you are right to side with your own country. I—I shouldn't like to think you had not done so. There is Mr. Bunsen, too," continued Vesta; "I suppose he will go also, to fight for his country. My father must find a new clerk," she added laughing; "unless the bank is closed during the war."

"He may leave Johannesburg, but I bet he

won't fight more than he can help," said Geoff bitterly; "it would not be like him."

In the midst of their conversation the last subject of it was suddenly shown into the room —Mr. Guy Bunsen.

Guy's manner towards Vesta greatly infuriated Geoff at all times. He chose to assume the air of having a private understanding with her, and when he was present in Vesta's company, Geoff had some difficulty in keeping his hands off his old enemy, though they had never actually quarrelled since they met, after four years, in Johannesburg. Geoff had quite forgotten that they had been deadly foes at Cubberly, and it would certainly appear that Bunsen had forgotten it also, though at the time he had vowed more than once that he would have his revenge one day, sooner or later, for the many lickings he had suffered at Geoff's hands behind the fives courts.

This afternoon, since Guy had interrupted what would probably be his last interview with Vesta, and one, too, which he had intended to make a tender and memorable one for both, Geoff was not inclined to be extra

civil to the other, though up to now he had never erred on the side of incivility.

"We were talking of the war, Bunsen," said Geoff. "We shall volunteer — both Bunny and I — and my brother Hugh's coming over from Sydney to join us at Durban; you'd make a good mark for the Boer bullets—you'd better join, too!"

"Pooh! I bet you'll not get taken on," said Bunsen; "they want soldiers, not amateurs."

"There's one thing pretty certain," retorted Geoff, "and that is that *you* won't fight in any case, because you'll be too jolly careful of your skin to risk it."

"Maybe I shall be quite as ready to serve the Queen as those who talk loudest about volunteering, knowing that there's no chance of their getting taken at their word," Guy sneered.

"Oh, come, Bunsen, you usen't to be so confoundedly conspicuous for your valour at Cubberly," retorted Geoff, laughing. "You may have forgotten that we were at school together, and that I saw something of your ways there."

"Oh, no, I haven't forgotten," said Bunsen,

glancing at Geoff with eyes that looked green and curious; "I have a very good memory."

"You usen't to like fighting much then," continued Geoff, who was growing angrier and more inclined to be rude as the conversation proceeded. "Now, I'll tell you what I've been thinking you'll do when war's declared, and you'd better take the hint like a wise man and do it: sham ill and stay in Johannesburg; old Paul won't turn out a sick man. He'll keep his eye on you, though, remember that, and hang you if he suspects you of staying behind to act the spy."

Bunsen laughed unpleasantly.

"You're uncommonly funny and witty to-day, Bigby," he said; "isn't he, Vesta? Vesta and I were talking about you the other day, and we agreed that you had about as good an opinion of yourself as any chap your size and weight under the sun; didn't we, Vesta?"

"That wasn't it at all," said Vesta, flushing; "we said—at least, I said—that you had plenty of self-reliance, Geoff; but I didn't mean it as Mr. Bunsen says. I think I said I liked self-reliance—at anyrate, I do."

"Thanks, Vesta," said Geoff gratefully; "I

daresay I have too good an opinion of myself, but I can't help thinking the authorities wouldn't refuse the services of two fellows like Bunny and me, who know the country and the language, and who can shoot and ride pretty well besides, just because we haven't been drilled in some regimental barrack-yard."

Vesta's eye passed from the long and gawky figure of Bunsen to Geoff's well-knit and sturdy frame, lingering on the latter, and ending with a kindly look in Geoff's eyes which was ample indication to him that Bunsen's speech, intended to damage, had not injured the object of its venomous attack, so far as she was concerned. But she said nothing.

CHAPTER II

THE MOCKING BOER

ON the following day war was declared by the two Republics against Great Britain, who, with singular patience, thus allowed herself to be attacked unprepared, and her possessions invaded, rather than seem to push forward a war which she did not desire, and which—up to the last moment—she hoped to avoid.

Once all hope of peace was abandoned, Johannesburg began to empty itself quickly of the thousands of English "Outlanders" still remaining in the town. The last few trains were densely crowded with passengers. These did not enjoy the conveniences we are accustomed to in England of first, second, and third class carriages, but travelled for the most part in goods and coal trucks, and were glad enough to get away, even thus accommodated,

from the ill-mannered jeers and remarks of the Boers watching their departure.

The Bigbys waited for the last possible train, having promised their father to do so in the hope of a tardy patching-up of the quarrel, and the avoidance, at the last moment, of actual hostilities.

But now the moment had come for departure, and they had locked up the house and drawn the shutters, and had come to the station with as little luggage as possible, having taken only such things as were absolutely necessary for an absence of a few months. Vesta—to Geoff's huge delight — was at the crowded station in order to see the Bigbys off, and in the jostle of the mob he contrived to possess himself of her hand, and to hold it a little while in his own.

"Do you think you will be able to let me hear, now and then, how you are?" he whispered. "I shall long to know."

"I will do my best," she whispered back, smiling cheerfully, though her eyes looked wistful and a little dim. "If you don't hear, you will know that my letters have miscarried, for I shall write in any case."

"Oh!" exclaimed Geoff joyously, "thank you ever so much, Vesta. Now I shall go away with a lighter heart. I was miserable to think that I should neither see nor hear of you for Heaven knows how long. May I tell you a secret, Vesta?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"It is that I love you," said Geoff, making a dash.

Vesta looked up in his face, smiling very sweetly. "I think I know that already," she said. "It is very wrong to love the enemies of your country."

"At anyrate, you are not angry?" whispered Geoff.

"I could hardly be that, because" — she paused, blushing and smiling.

"Because what? Tell me, Vesta."

"Because perhaps I am an equal offender myself," she replied very low.

Her hand tightened a little in the grasp of Geoff's, who was certainly at this moment the very happiest young man in all South Africa, in spite of wars and crowded trains and separations and everything else.

Bunny Bigby had been talking to a friend

meanwhile, and suddenly turned from him to speak to his brother.

"I say, Geoff," he said, "d'you know what Hellings has just told me? Our friend Bunsen is laid up, and has to stay behind."

Geoff, in the joy of his heart, laughed aloud.

"Why, I declare, I'm one of the minor prophets!" he exclaimed. "I told him he would do this very thing; didn't I, Vesta?"

"You *advised* him to," said Vesta. "There was no prophesying about it."

"What's his game?" laughed Bunny. "He's up to something, you may bet."

"To keep out of mischief, I should say," said Geoff, laughing also, "and to save his skin."

"Perhaps he wants to keep an eye on you, Vesta," said Bunny, with the frankness of eighteen. "He always seems to me a bit tender your way, and he wants to see you don't come to any harm when we all march into Johannesburg about Christmas time, eh?"

Vesta blushed, but said nothing. Geoff frowned,—this aspect of the matter had not presented itself to him,—and said that if that were the case he should recommend Bunsen to

clear out of Johannesburg before the rest marched in.

Then the train drew up, and the crowding and pushing began, amid mock cheers from many Boers standing about; and eventually poor Mrs. Bigby was hoisted by her sons into a coal truck, and made as comfortable as possible upon and among the Gladstone bags and rugs they had brought with them. Geoff had had the forethought to include a couple of pillows among the rest of the *impedimenta*, so that his mother was better off than many other ladies during that most memorable and unspeakably uncomfortable journey. But discomfort was not the worst feature of their retirement towards the frontier—more than once the party were menaced with actual danger of personal injury, or even death.

The nights were bitterly cold at this time, while the days were almost unbearably hot, the sun baking down upon the open and overcrowded trucks in a manner which was extremely distressing for the travellers, who suffered greatly from want of water, the supply the Bigbys had brought with them having been exhausted in a very short while, thanks

to the generosity with which they shared it with many others who had none.

At last the need for water became so acute that on one occasion, when the train stopped at a wayside station, Bunny declared that at all hazards he would take the bottles and run across a field, at the farther end of which he saw a small running stream, in order to refill them.

"Well, find out first how long we are to wait here," said Geoff. "It wouldn't do to be left behind."

There were numbers of armed Boers standing about the platform chaffing, and in some cases even threatening, the passengers. Bunny climbed out of the truck, and addressing one of them—choosing one who seemed to be taking no part in the prevailing ill-mannered conduct—asked him civilly whether he knew how long the train would stand here. Bunny spoke Dutch fluently, though perhaps not quite so perfectly as Geoff, who really spoke it like a native.

The Boer eyed him cynically for a moment,

"What is that to you, you redneck pup?" he said. "You may thank the Almighty if it

ever goes on again to carry your English carcass out of reach of Boer whips."

This sally provoked roars of mirth from the fellow's companions standing around.

"Oh, never fear!" retorted Bunny boldly. "You shall soon have us back, but when we do come you'll take good care we are not within reach of your hide."

"Shut up, Bunny!" said Geoff, in English. "This isn't the time or place for getting up a row; wait until we come back, we shall have plenty of opportunities of returning such compliments with interest."

"That seems a good reason for taking care so saucy a gamecock does not get the chance of returning among us," said the Boer, continuing the conversation. "What think you of this now, my redneck chicken?" He placed a revolver close to Bunny's face, and held it there. Bunny flushed, but did not flinch; Mrs. Bigby uttered a shriek. The Boers standing around laughed aloud.

"All right, mother, he wouldn't dare!" said Geoff, who looked, however, very stern, and held his own revolver ready in the side-pocket of his Norfolk jacket.

"Shoot if you dare, you Boer coward," said Bunny.

"Don't shoot, Jan, though he deserves it," cried some Boer, apparently in authority. "The Commandant's train may come in at any moment."

The fellow lowered his revolver. "The youngster stands fire pretty well," he laughed. "Probably he is *slim*, and knows I didn't mean to shoot."

"You didn't dare!" said Bunny.

"Shut up, Bunny," said Geoff again, "and let well alone."

"If the Commandant's train is expected, ours will have to wait till it has gone on, since there's only a single down line," suggested someone in the truck, "so there's plenty of time to get water."

Several young fellows jumped out of the truck upon hearing this obvious and convincing remark, Geoff among the rest. They took all the receptacles that could be collected, and tramped across the field towards the stream.

"Where are those fools going to?" shouted the Boer in authority, a field-cornet. "Some-

one jump on his horse and whip them back again."

Someone jumped on his horse as desired, and rode after the parched travellers, whose only offence was that they required water and had left the train to get it. The mounted Boer flourished a *sjambok*, or whip of raw thongs, threatening the travellers with it.

"Go back, you English fools!" he cried, "or I'll drive you there like cows; your business is to get out of the country as quickly as you can; we don't want you here."

Some ran back to the station, either alarmed at the prospect of being *sjamboked*, or frightened lest the train should move off without them. A few went as far as the stream and filled their water-bottles—among these Geoff and Bunny.

"Come, bustle up, you there!" cried the Boer, cracking his whip. The lash touched an Englishman's shoulder; he swore loudly at the fellow, who retaliated by aiming a vicious cut at him. The Englishman was helpless to protect himself; he had a revolver in his pocket, but dared not use it, for, undoubtedly, if he should, he would at once be mobbed by

Boers, and nothing could then save him from being overpowered and probably murdered; he knew that well enough. All he could do was to curse the man very heartily in English, vowing that if ever they should meet on the battlefield or elsewhere he would exact a terrible vengeance.

"If the blackguard touches me with that thing," said Bunny, "I'll shoot him."

"Do nothing of the sort, Bunny," said Geoff. "This is not the moment for resistance, we must go with the stream."

"I can't!" said Bunny. "If the scoundrel whipped me I should want to strangle him."

"So should I, but I wouldn't do it. I should think of mother sitting there unprotected in the coal-truck, and that would help me to restrain myself."

"Go on quicker, you redneck hounds!" cried the Boer, riding behind them and cracking his whip. The lash all but touched them. Bunny's face flushed scarlet, and Geoff saw his hand steal to the pocket of his Norfolk jacket. That was where Bunny's revolver reposed.

"Easy there, Bunny," he said; "keep cool!"

"Quicker!" cried the Boer; "run!" He cracked his whip again. This time the end of the lash twisted itself round Geoff's ankle. Geoff looked closely at the man, his face pale with suppressed rage. The Boer laughed.

"You'll know me again, I daresay," he said.

"Undoubtedly," said Geoff, "I shall remember that scar over your left eye, and the shape of your nose. You'll have to look out, my friend, if we come to close quarters one day, for when we do I may remind you of this afternoon."

"What, going to volunteer against us?" laughed the Boer. "Better wait until you're a little older—they won't want boys."

Geoff took no notice of this remark. The station now reached, he handed up the water-bottles and climbed into his truck, followed by Bunny. Presently a Boer came walking down the platform, threatening here a woman, there a man, as he went along, with a whip which he carried. As he passed the carriage in which the Bigby party sat, he made a grimace at Mrs. Bigby and flourished his whip in her face. Instantly, before Geoff could inter-

fere to prevent it, Bunny's fist shot out and the Boer measured his length on the boards, falling like an ox, so sudden and so violent was the blow.

"Great Scot, Bunny, you've done it now!" said Geoff.

CHAPTER III

GENTLEMAN JOUBERT

THE discomfited Boer rose quickly to his feet, swearing horribly. He sprang back to the side of the truck and laid hold of Bunny, who instantly jumped out, followed by Geoff. Other Boers came rushing down the platform, shouting excitedly—all things seemed ripe for a serious quarrel.

"Keep cool, for Heaven's sake, Bunny!" said Geoff. "You've made one terrible mistake—don't make another!"

The field-cornet strode up.

"What is it?" he cried. "What has happened?"

The discomfited Boer explained that he had been suddenly struck and knocked down by "one of these *verdomte* Outlanders." He was still describing—according to his own version — the occurrence, when there were

shouts that the General-Commandant's train approached.

"Keep the whole train under arrest until further notice," said the field-cornet, hurrying off to greet his superior. "We shall see to this later."

"Get back into the train, you whelps of mischief," said the Boer.

"Oh, no!" replied Geoff boldly; "if the Commandant is coming, he shall judge between us."

"Get into the train, I say, you whelp of a *rooinek*!" shouted the fellow; but both Geoff and Bunny absolutely refused to move.

"If this is General Joubert, he will see that we are not brow-beaten by these bullies, mother," said Geoff, explaining his obstinacy for his mother's benefit. "It will be safer to put the matter before him, if one can, than to leave it."

General Joubert alighted from his train to speak to the field-cornet. He saw the group of men upon the platform, alongside of the Outlander train.

"What is the matter? Has anything

happened there?" he asked. The field-cornet began to explain, as the two moved down the platform towards the place of disturbance.

Geoff stepped forward as he approached.

"If you are General Joubert," he said, "I should like to give my version of this matter. I speak the truth. My father is Conrad Bigby, the engineer"—

"Yes," said the General; "I know him well"—

"This lady is his wife—my mother, and the Boer there, with the brown hat, threatened many English women with the whip he holds, having received no provocation; when he threatened my mother, my brother, who is young and quick-tempered, struck at the man, as, of course, he deserved, and"—

"Yes, yes," said the old General. "I ask your pardon, madam; this is a dangerous and difficult time, and our people are not easily controlled when in presence of the English, with whom, from this day, we are unfortunately in a state of war. Get into the train, young gentlemen; you do right to protect your mother. Let them be, field-cornet, and tell

these fools to behave like men, and not like beasts!"

General Joubert bowed courteously and passed down the platform.

Presently his train departed, carrying with it both the field-cornet and all those Boers who had taken a hand in the game of bullying the passengers; and right thankful were these to see them go. Geoff saw his friend of the scarred face looking out of a window as the train passed. The Boer laughed and jeered, and stretching a hand out of the window, cracked the *sjambok* that he held.

"For next time that we meet!" he shouted.

"All right, my friend; I shall remember your ugly phiz!" Geoff shouted back.

Thus ended an incident which looked at one moment as though it might finish less happily for the Englishmen concerned.

Here and there, until the frontier was reached, such episodes were repeated, and the passengers bullied and insulted to the heart's content of such Boers as happened to desire the opportunity of enjoying a fling at the "escaping" English. It was a miserable journey, and though neither Geoff and Bunny,

nor their mother, were implicated in any further disturbances of the peace, all were thankful and relieved when the frontier was passed and Natal reached.

The Bigbys travelled as far as Pietermaritzburg, where they had friends, and here Mrs. Bigby remained, in order to take up her permanent quarters during the time of exile from Johannesburg.

Geoff and Bunny went on to Durban. Their brother Hugh was not due from Sydney for a week or two, at least; but they were anxious to enrol themselves in some corps of Outlanders as soon as it should please the General commanding the forces in Natal to organise such a regiment.

But to their immense surprise and disgust, they learned that there was no intention to form any such corps.

"What!" exclaimed Geoff, "not employ *us*, who know the Boers and their ways, and speak the language, and can shoot and ride as well as most? Why not?"

The gentleman interviewed shrugged his shoulders.

"I fancy the C.O.'s like to employ regular

drilled troops," he said. And at that it remained.

Geoff and Bunny held a council of war.

There would surely be an opportunity to enlist before very long, for the authorities could scarcely ignore for ever such obviously useful material as was here to be had for the asking. But what was to be done in the meanwhile?

"Hang about and kick one's heels here or at Maritzburg, hoping for better times, while all sorts of fun is going on almost under our very noses," said Geoff; "or"—

"Or what?" echoed Bunny, rather dismally.

"Or go right up north, and see what the Boers are going to do?"

Bunny jumped up from his seat.

"What! act on our own hooks?" he exclaimed joyously. "That's a splendid notion, Geoff—only should we do any good that way—be of any use, I mean, to our side?"

"We should act as kind of amateur scouts," said Geoff, smiling at his own idea, which pleased him immensely.

"It's simply the grandest notion possible!" said Bunny. "Geoff, you're a genius! I wish to goodness old Hugh were here to go up with us."

"He'll be here in less than a month. Meanwhile we needn't waste our time. When he's about due we'll come back and fetch him, and then we'll all three act together—that is, if the generals still refuse to employ us."

So the brothers went up to Maritzburg, and dutifully informed their mother of their intentions; and when Mrs. Bigby offered no opposition to their enterprise the two young men did not wait to ask anyone else, but set themselves to arrange preliminaries without further delay. It would be impossible to take luggage, therefore they must be content with the few things they could carry on their backs —a suit of yellowish-brown corduroy, a slouch hat, a good rifle and plenty of cartridges, a large, flat flask for water, a tin of condensed meat, and a blanket. This constituted the whole of the kit of each brother, and with this they set their faces northwards and started upon their enterprise—which was, to put it clearly, to hang about as near as they dared

to the fore-foot of the enemy, and to report back to the British camp anything sufficiently important to be so reported.

During the first few days of the war Geoff and Bunny Bigby, being new to the work of scouting, acted very cautiously indeed. They scouted up the neck of Natal, however, until they came in touch with the advance patrols of the enemy, who did them the honour to fire a couple of shots at them. This was north of Newcastle, the inhabitants of which town had mostly already gone south, the authorities having warned them that Newcastle could not be held, and that no attempt would be made to save it.

When those shots were fired, actually the first in the war, Geoff and Bunny felt a pardonable pride in having been the very first target for Boer bullets, which, however, came close enough to be unpleasant.

"Look here," suggested Geoff, "why not wear Boer dress? We shall get less shot at."

"Certainly," Bunny agreed. "But where's the dress?"

"We must catch—or kill—a couple of

Boers," said Geoff. "That should be easy enough."

It proved the simplest matter in the world; for the very next day they stalked a pair of fellows, scouting like themselves. They saw them coming along from afar, and, by creeping like snakes through the grass, and taking advantage of every particle of cover, contrived to conceal themselves in a spot which the men were bound to pass. As they passed, each of the two Boers was suddenly borne to earth by a fairly heavy Bigby springing upon his back from behind, as a lion might upon an unsuspecting antelope.

"Here are our two cheap suits of clothes," said Geoff, as he tied his man's wrists together with his own strap. "They aren't extra clean," he added, "but the more like Boers we look the safer we shall be."

"But won't our own chaps shoot us?" said Bunny pertinently.

And Geoff replied that there was certainly that danger, only that every Tommy would surely know a live spy was more valuable than a dead one—if only for the pleasure of getting him hung. And in case of real danger there

was always the white flag. "When in danger," said Geoff, "wave your pocket-handkerchief."

"Jove! mine won't be white long at this rate," said Bunny, producing one which would have caused pain to any respectable laundress even in its present condition.

CHAPTER IV

THE CAPTURE OF BUNNY

THE two scouts marched their prisoners into the English camp outside Dundee, where they were complimented by General Symons on their *coup*. The General contrived to gather some information from the fellows, whether true or false, as to the numbers and disposition of the Boer forces now invading Natal. Geoff acted as interpreter, and was obviously so expert at speaking the Boer language that General Symons suggested that he should remain in camp in the capacity of permanent interpreter.

But this, though kindly meant, and a compliment to his linguistic talents, was not at all in accordance with Geoff's temperament. He wished to fight, not to hang about "waiting to give prisoners a kind of *vivâ voce* exam!" as he afterwards expressed it. And

until he could be taken on to act as trooper he preferred to act as scout. "Very well," said the General, "but don't get yourself captured, or if you do, take care to have plausible answers ready for any awkward questions they may ask you!"

"We are going to take the liberty of exchanging clothes with these two fellows," said Geoff, "and as I can talk Dutch as easily as English, I hope to escape capture."

"If you take my advice you will not do that," said the General, "for if caught and identified as English, you would probably be shot or hanged. These prisoners of yours have given useful information. I should be obliged if you could confirm the truth of it by your own observations."

When our two scouts presently left the camp, they did so with light hearts, for they now enjoyed from the General a kind of informal commission to carry out certain important work for him. They were no longer "on their own hook." They were to learn all they could, and presently report upon the disposition of Joubert's forces.

And while busy upon this enterprise they

met with the adventure which is the pivot upon which this history turns.

The brothers had had a hard day's work scouting on the flank of Yule's retreating column. They had obtained invaluable information this day, at no little personal risk, and at the price of great personal weariness. They had carried their news into the temporary English camp about noon, having cleverly stolen a couple of Boer horses in order to do so the quicker, and had afterwards ridden out once more, to stampede their horses presently, and creep out upon the flank of the retiring army in search of further information. When darkness fell they were still far from the English force, between them and a large commando of burghers which was too discreet to come within touch of the claws of the sullen British lion. Bunny was tired to death, and Geoff not much fresher, so that when they stumbled straight into an empty farmhouse, probably vacated but this day or yesterday by some poor colonist who suddenly found his home surrounded by contending foes, they were glad enough of the shelter, and prepared to occupy the building for the night.

There were a few remnants of food in the larder and even some kaffir beer, which they annexed to their own use, and having supped, half asleep, lay down upon two beds, when Bunny quickly exchanged his state of half-asleep for that of total and log-like unconsciousness.

Geoff rose from his bed with a sigh.

"I suppose I ought to try and keep awake and watch," he thought, "but I'm afraid it'll be a failure."

It was a failure. Poor Geoff walked a hundred times up and down the room and out of the house and in again, but in spite of every heroic attempt to keep them open, his eyes would close; and at length he was obliged to recognise the inevitable.

"I can't help it—it's no use! I must sleep!" he said. "It's a most unprofessional and 'unscout-like' thing to do, but I'll be hanged if I can keep awake another minute!"

Geoff lay down, and in one half of the very narrow limit he had given himself for remaining awake he was snoring as loudly as Bunny.

Now, most unfortunately, a small advance

party of Boers, but an hour or so later, stumbled upon this farm building just as Geoff and his brother had done. They came to search for supper and a bed. The supper they found not, for the two Englishmen had made other arrangements for the disposal of the provisions left behind by the late occupant, but the beds they found, and—what was more —a snoring *rooinek* upon each.

This was very good luck, and the Boers—half a dozen in number—took care that it should not slip through their fingers. They removed the rifles from beside their sleeping owners, and the revolvers from their pockets. Then, having thus extracted the fangs of the serpents, they awoke them with difficulty and, having locked them into a small, windowless room, occupied the beds they had vacated.

Geoff and Bunny made but a short struggle. They were too dead-weary to realise until too late that they were caught. By the time they realised this stunning circumstance they had been overpowered and were being half-carried, half-shoved into their temporary dungeon.

"Great Cæsar, Bunny!" exclaimed poor Geoff, almost weeping in his helpless misery.

"What have we done? We're caught like rats in a trap!"

"Will they hang us?" said Bunny.

"Oh, no, they daren't do that; but they won't let us go. We've seen the last of the war, Bunny, my poor chappie!" ended Geoff, speaking with more than a break in his voice; "and oh, what fun we were having!" he ended.

"Cheer up! We may get out yet," said Bunny. "Let's kick the confounded door down. We were asleep when they bagged us, but now we're awake."

Bunny suited the action to the word. He kicked at the door with all his force. It rattled and showed signs of splitting.

A voice instantly came from the other side—

"Stop that *verdomte* noise, or you'll have your kop broke," it said.

"Open the door and let us out, you mottle-faced Dutch scarecrow!"

This was a very rude speech of Bunny's, and the only possible apology for it is that he was extremely angry.

"When the door is open you get a Mauser bullet in your stomach!" said the Boer. "I

am here on purpose to wait for you to come out."

"It's no good, Bunny. If you break the door open he'll shoot you at sight. Come and lie down and rest, and we'll think of some plan of escape."

So the brothers lay on the floor and talked in a whisper.

"What if one of us should escape and not the other?" said Bunny.

"If you were carried off and I escaped, I would not rest till I got you back again," Geoff replied.

"Let's stick together if we can, though," said Bunny. "I don't think it would be so easy to effect a rescue supposing one of us were carried off to Pretoria, or some other town."

"I should devote myself soul and body to getting you back," said Geoff. "Remember this if anything happens, Bunny!"

"I will; and you remember the same thing," said Bunny.

Then the two captives discussed all possible ways of giving their enemies the slip; and, having reviewed every likely eventuality, and

the best course to be taken under each possible set of circumstances, they both fell asleep, hoping to gather strength for whatsoever effort or enterprise the morrow might have in store for them.

It was daylight when they were awakened and told to come out of their prison. It had been agreed between them that no attempt to escape should be made at this point, therefore they came quietly forth and acquiesced in all they were called upon to do.

There was no breakfast either for captors or captives, but Geoff saw, with a glow of pleasure, that things were apparently about to shape themselves somewhat favourably for his hopes of a speedy escape. For four of the Boers presently mounted their horses and rode away south, probably to join their own commando; while the remaining two, having fastened a rope securely about the waist of each of their prisoners, mounted also, and bade the *rooineks* run.

"All you English can run," said one of them; "you showed us that at Majuba."

Neither of the brothers made any audible reply to this, considering it wiser to remain

silent until the right moment should come for speech or for action. But both ground their teeth and perhaps made a few remarks inwardly, of a nature neither complimentary nor peaceful towards the speaker.

Fortunately for both prisoners the road presently lay over so rough a piece of ground that their captors were obliged to pull up and walk their horses. Geoff and Bunny were both completely pumped for the time being; for the Boers had taken care neither should be allowed to preserve any more breath than was absolutely necessary to support life. There was no knowing, they reflected, what the rascals might not do, if they were not kept in a dead-beat condition!

This was, as it presently turned out, a wise precaution, for no sooner had Geoff recovered sufficient breath to justify the attempt which must be made, he knew, now or never, than he caught Bunny's eye and winked. Bunny's lips moved in response, forming the words, "One—two—three!" and at the last syllable each man suddenly sprang upwards at his jailer, seized him round the waist, and pulled with desperate energy.

Both Boers were caught unprepared. Geoff's antagonist came to earth with scarcely a struggle, and Geoff's hands seized his throat in an instant, as the two men rolled on the ground, pinching it so tightly that the Boer dropped his rifle in order to relieve the pressure at his neck by gripping Geoff's hands.

This was Geoff's opportunity. Seizing the rifle, he sprang in an instant to his feet and presented it at his opponent's head. The Boer promptly begged for mercy. Keeping the rifle at his shoulder, Geoff looked about to see what had happened in Bunny's little affair during the few seconds which he had occupied in arranging his own business. To his horror, Bunny and his man had disappeared. Moreover, to make matters still worse, the horse which his own antagonist had ridden was gone also—scared, doubtless, by the sudden storm of fighting and struggling upon his back and under his feet.

"Bunny!" shouted Geoff, with all his lung-power, "where are you?"

Receiving no reply, Geoff ran quickly to the top of the stony kopje upon which the struggle

had taken place, and looking thence, he was in time to perceive two things: Bunny's Boer, still mounted, galloping madly over the broken ground, and still, apparently, struggling with Bunny himself, who clung with one foot thrown over the animal's back behind the saddle, and the other dangling, while his arms were firmly clenched round the body of the rider. The other horse followed but a few yards behind. So they went for a hundred paces, then the entire group was lost to view.

Geoff's first instinct had been to raise his rifle and send a shot in support of his struggling brother; but the danger of hitting the wrong man appalled him; he might shoot the horse, but that, too, was a dangerous thing to attempt, and he dare not try it. Then poor Geoff sat down upon a boulder and cried aloud in his anguish.

"Oh, Bunny, Bunny!" he groaned, "I have lost you, and it was my fault!"

Presently he added, "I will fetch you back, Bunny; I will not rest until I have done it, not if I have to follow you to the ends of the earth!"

CHAPTER V

PROJECTS

PRESENTLY Geoff roused himself with a start; in his grief to have lost his brother he had forgotten his own prisoner. Geoff ran down the side of the kopje, but the fellow had disappeared—it was only natural that he should have done so.

But the greater calamity dominated the lesser, and Geoff, frantic with grief, set out for Ladysmith with scarcely a thought for the escape of his man, almost numbed by the magnitude of the calamity that had befallen Bunny. He scarcely knew how to break the news to his mother. How would she take it? For Mrs. Bigby adored her youngest son; the brothers were accustomed, laughingly, to call Bunny "Little Benjamin, her ruler," and the news of his capture would be a terrible blow to her. But Mrs. Bigby was a brave and good woman,

and, seeing the distress of her son, she received the news with wonderful composure and fortitude, taking care not to add to Geoff's grief by any sign of anxiety on Bunny's behalf. Geoff told the whole story from beginning to end, and found his mother smiling at the end of it.

"Aren't you angry with me, mother?" he asked. "He might, one feels, have been saved somehow; I ought to have kept a better look-out upon him."

"How could you?" Mrs. Bigby smiled. "You did your best, but your hands were occupied with your own struggle. Angry with you? A thousand times no, my son! On the contrary, I see very plainly that you could have done no more than you did, and with all my heart I thank you for saving at least one of my sons to me."

"I wish to Heaven it had been the other one I had saved!" sighed Geoff, relieved, nevertheless, by his mother's attitude, "and that I had got myself carried away instead of old Bunny! However, cheer up, mother, for I have vowed not to rest until I have fetched him back, and I mean to keep my word. How

shall you take it if we end by both being caught and imprisoned?"

Mrs. Bigby was silent for a minute or two.

"Even if you were, I think you would be better so—safer, I mean—sitting in prison together, than if you were constantly making yourselves a mark for the enemy's bullets, as you have been doing up to this time in your dangerous scouting work. That is my point of view—the mother's," laughed Mrs. Bigby. "Of course, I don't expect you to see the matter in the same light; but if you were captives together, you could at least help one another to escape. Talk it over with Hugh, my son, when he comes," Mrs. Bigby ended, "and anything that you two may think best, I shall also think the best."

So Geoff went down to Durban to meet Hugh, just arriving from Sydney. As the brothers clasped hands on the quay, Geoff told Hugh of the calamity which had befallen poor Bunny. Hugh looked grave.

"They won't shoot him, will they?" he asked.

"God forbid! They wouldn't dare! They've got to think of their own prisoners in our hands; we have a good many already."

"Where will he be, then—near where they got him, or up at Pretoria?"

"That's what I should like to find out, and what I mean you and I *shall* find out. When we know where he is, we'll go and fetch him back, if you're game."

"That'd be a silly trick, surely," said Hugh; "for instead of one prisoner, there'd be three. We'll get him back when we march into Pretoria, but not a day before. Who put that mad idea into your head?"

"But I don't see that it *is* mad. Can't you conceive any possible way of rescuing a fellow, supposing you know where he is confined?"

"Well, I can't! I daresay I am not so sanguine by nature as you are, but I can't, and there's an end. Imagine me, not speaking a word of the language, deliberately going into the enemy's country to rescue a prisoner from one of their jails. It would be madness."

"It would be difficult, of course; but I don't think it either mad or hopeless; nor does mother. We wouldn't go as combatants, in the uniform of such and such regiments, but as private individuals."

"Then we'd be shot as spies, man, or crammed into a prison. *You* might pass as a Boer pedlar, or farmer, or anything you like, since you know the language; but I am hopelessly English, and should be suspected at once.

"Quite true," sighed Geoff. "It would be a horrible risk for you, and I oughtn't to have suggested your going. I feel, though, that I must go and scout about for poor Bunn; it is sort of my fault that he was taken, you see; will you forgive me if I go away for a bit and leave you? I should join your corps, whatever you may enlist in, later on."

"No, Geoff, don't be an old fool," said Hugh kindly. "The enterprise is too rash and dangerous, it couldn't be carried out with any prospect of success; you must drop the idea. We'll enlist in this Imperial Light Horse they're talking about, or, if you're bent on scouting, we'll scout; but to undertake to besiege Pretoria on our own hook, with no artillery but our wits, would be a foolish enterprise; believe me, it would. I daresay I am as anxious to help Bunny as you are."

"Well, you didn't lose him, you see; he was under my care."

"Bosh! You did all you could; you devised a capital plan of escape, and carried out your share, while Bunny failed, having a stronger man and a more timid horse to deal with, probably."

Geoff sighed. "At anyrate, I am going to try," he said. "I have vowed to do this, and do it I shall. You'd better not come, I quite see that would be foolish; but help me, if you can, by thinking of the best way for me to set about it."

Hugh promised this much, but he did not look with favour upon the idea of an attempt to find and release Bunny; therefore he did not encourage Geoff's day-dream, as he considered it, by discussing the matter. But something happened a day or two later to make him think more favourably of Geoff's project. Someone showed him a Boer newspaper—the *Staats Courant*—in which was published a list of English prisoners already captured. The disaster at Nicholson's Nek had just occurred, and besides the long list of the poor fellows forced to surrender on that unfortunate day, there was published a shorter one of "casual prisoners," and among these latter, mentioned as taken to Pretoria and there imprisoned,

Hugh read with mixed feelings the name of "Bernard Bigby, non-combatant, supposed farmer, captured after resistance in a farm-house within the Boer lines."

He was safe, then—thank God for that!

That evening, as the brothers sat and chatted with their mother, Geoff suddenly leapt out of his chair as though attacked by a spasm of pain. "Great Scot!" he exclaimed, ridiculously loud, "I've got it! The thing—the dodge—*the* very plan!" continued Geoff, almost dancing round the room in his excitement. "I see as plainly as if it were all written in a book, how it can be done. Good Heavens! how is it I never thought of it before? Bunny can be fetched away without danger, and almost without difficulty."

"Nonsense, old man, you're raving," said Hugh. "I'm sorry you're on that tack again."

"No. Listen before you judge, and listen well, because I tell you candidly that I intend to work this business through, even if you oppose it. I shall get someone else to help me if you won't!" Geoff walked up and down the room for a moment or two, too excited to speak, and perhaps too angry, for he felt that

he was upon a hot scent, and did not like to be checked.

Hugh looked on in surprise, for the brothers had always been such good friends that it was something unheard of that Geoff should suggest such a thing as acting in this matter for himself, even though it were in opposition to the opinions of the rest of the family.

"You may be sure I shall advise you as I honestly think," said Hugh presently. "But I am not going to counsel anything outrageously risky. If you've thought of a plan for rescuing Bunny, let's hear it, and mother and I will give our opinions."

Geoff paced about for a while longer.

"I am sorry I said that. At least, said it *like* that," he said presently, "but I stick to it that I do intend to work the thing, and I hope I shall persuade you to work it with me. Of course, I'd rather have you than anyone else; you know that."

"Yes, old man, I know that," Hugh laughed, good-naturedly. "Now let's hear how it's to be done."

CHAPTER VI

GEOFF'S SCHEME

"WELL, it's like this," said Geoff, brightening up. "Mother'll tell you that I can take off a Boer farmer, as I do sometimes for fun, to the life."

"He certainly can do that," said Mrs. Bigby, laughing. "You should see him act Oom Paul, Hugh. I assure you, one can scarcely sit in one's chair for laughing; but he's just as good in the part of a young farmer coming into market."

"That'll do, mother," laughed Geoff, "it's my innings, remember. Well, my idea is this: we get through the Boer lines first of all—that won't be difficult, though it is one of the *most* difficult parts in the enterprise, so that the rest, you'll say, must be easy enough, and so it is. You, I should explain, would figure as a trooper of irregular cavalry, or any other

regiment engaged at Ladysmith, while I should be got up as a Boer. I am armed, you are not. I am mounted, you are on foot."

"What fun for me," laughed Hugh. "Go on!"

"In a word, you are my prisoner. You are one of the fellows that came to grief at Nicholson's Nek, you see, only you lost yourself for a couple of days, and wandered into the Boer lines. Well, I have an order from the field-cornet to deliver you to the cornet in charge at Pretoria prison. Now d'you see the drift?"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Hugh. "Wait a minute—you take away my breath. So that you are supposed to be escorting me, an English prisoner, to Pretoria? Yes, I understand so far. Go on!"

"Capital! Very well, then; at Pretoria I give you over to the field-cornet in charge, and you are duly shut up"—

"Great Scot! man, this is a ripping game for me, I must say!" roared Hugh. "It will be very nice for Bunny having me for a companion, but even the pleasure of Bunny's society will scarcely compensate me for the loss of my liberty."

"You won't lose it for long, old chap. With you two fellows inside and me outside, why, hang it! surely we'll contrive a way out between us."

"Well, we might, of course, and we might get knocked on the head trying it. What do you think, mother? Is there anything in Geoff's plan, besides ingenuity? I quite admit it has plenty of that."

"It is a bold and clever scheme," said Mrs. Bigby, "and worthy of my Geoff; but, of course, there would be danger in the enterprise, from beginning to end of it, and the getting out of Pretoria would be so much more perilous than the getting in—you must not forget that, Geoff."

"There's one thing I had forgotten," said Hugh. "A prisoner going in as I should could take tools with him to help himself out again"—

"Good! so you could; you are coming round to my idea, Hugh, I can see you are—mother, you must too—oh, we'd be so careful, wouldn't we, Hugh? Buck up, old man, and persuade mother to think well of the plan."

Geoff was jubilant and happy; he believed

in his plan, and thought he saw Hugh coming round to it. His brother laughed.

"Steady, Geoff," he said, "you are going too fast. This is a thing that can't be decided upon either one way or the other in a hurry. It *is* a good plan, mind you; I grant that to start with, but I should like to consult one or two with older heads than our own. There's no *very* pressing hurry—let's sleep over it, at anyrate."

"Very well," said Geoff, "do! The longer you think over the scheme, the better you'll like it. Think of the fun we should have! And think of the useful information we might bring back to the generals about new fortifications at Pretoria, and so on."

"Oh yes, there's all that in its favour, of course," said Hugh, smiling, "but let's chew the cud a bit."

Later on, at the Outlanders' Club, Geoff spoke of his scheme to one or two of his friends there. Opinions were about equally divided.

Arguments *pro* and *con* were still passing backwards and forwards when there entered a figure well known to many of those present.

This was Mr. Nicholas Rosenthal, a millionaire from Johannesburg.

"Your plan will interest old Rosenthal," someone whispered to Geoff, "for, as you know, his son was at the front, and was carried off to Pretoria only a couple of days ago, after that infernal Nicholson's Nek business."

"What's all the discussion about?" asked Mr. Rosenthal, puffing up to the corner in which the younger men were assembled. "This infernal war, I suppose, as usual. Well, it'll kill some of us, boys, and ruin the rest. It's going to last three years; see if it don't. And my poor lad a prisoner in Pretoria, dying of nothing to do and nothing to eat."

"Bigby here has a brother a prisoner there, too, and he's talking of going up and bringing him back," said someone.

"Bringing him back? How's he going to do that? He'll get there quickly enough, if he wants to, but I wouldn't bet on his coming back, either with or without his brother."

"Tell Mr. Rosenthal your plan, Geoff," laughed his friend. "Perhaps he'd like to accompany you."

Geoff explained his scheme.

"But are you good enough Boer for a game like that?" asked Rosenthal, obviously somewhat impressed.

"I could take in old Paul himself, as far as that goes—I have done so. I went with another fellow at Christmas, and sang hymns outside his house. The old boy was greatly interested, and came and preached to us in the street, but he didn't give us a brass farthing."

"Well, but—your brother—does he agree? He has to risk a good deal, it seems to me, because he has to be locked up."

"My brother hasn't quite made up his mind," said Geoff. "He is considering the matter, but I hope I shall persuade him."

"I think I may go," said Hugh. He had been talking, luckily for Geoff and his scheme, with two men who thought well of it.

"Upon my word, I don't know but what you mightn't work it, if you set about the thing cautiously. Now I'll tell you what I'll do, young men—I'll offer you ten thousand pounds if you'll bring back my son, Jack, alive and well, together with your brother.

Come, I mean it! If the offer is of any use to you in helping you to a decision, make a note of it, for I am serious."

"Oh no, sir," said Hugh. "If we went, we should go in any case for old Bunny's sake, and should need no pecuniary inducement; and, once there, we should be glad to help your son out of his scrape if the opportunity offered."

"Well, do your best, and if he arrives with you, you may draw upon me for ten thousand pounds. Come, it's a sporting offer."

"It's certainly a sporting offer," laughed Geoff; "but we don't want your money, Mr. Rosenthal. We'll do our best for Jack without being paid for it."

"Well, do your best; but, remember, I can afford the money, and your service would be well worth it, for another man added to your party would greatly augment the risks, mind you. I can't bear to think of the poor boy being imprisoned there; for this infernal war'll last two or three years; see if it don't!" said this pessimistic old Outlander.

The result of this conversation, and of others unrecorded, was that Hugh came completely

round to think well of Geoff's plan; and, once converted, worked with all his might for its realisation.

Mr. Rosenthal asked, as a personal favour, to be allowed to present Geoff with a good horse; and as Geoff had no manner of objection to this, a beautiful animal was soon placed at his disposal. The plan was that Hugh, too, should start on horseback, and should ride as far as possible, but that he must go afoot if any Boers should be about, for Boers belong to the question-asking persuasion.

So Hugh procured the khaki uniform of an English trooper, and Geoff the brown corduroys of a Boer farmer, and early on a damp November evening—having taken a cheerful farewell of their mother—they set out upon their adventurous mission. Starting their riding from Estcourt, which they reached by train, the brothers took the westerly road towards Harrismith, making a wide sweep in order to pass well outside of the flank of the Boer position, leaving Ladysmith fifteen miles at least on their right.

They crossed the Tugela in safety, though not without challenge from the enemy's out-

posts, and heard in the distance the big guns of the English and of the enemy replying to one another in a nightly exchange of civilities as they passed on the flank of the invested English army.

More than once during the night they were pursued by small bodies of wide-awake Boers. But they preferred to be pursued at this stage of the proceedings rather than be asked awkward questions as to why Geoff's prisoner should be mounted upon a good horse, and other similar conundrums difficult to answer in so dangerous a neighbourhood, full, as Hugh expressed it, of confounded inquisitive people, who would be sure to want to know all about a fellow, even though he should assure them that he would rather be let alone.

The first night was spent uncomfortably at a point between the Tugela and the Harrismith road, but off the high road. The horses were hobbled, and allowed to wander in search of any grass that was to be found. They had had a big feed before leaving home, and would have to rough it for a day or two, after which Geoff hoped to be able to find more comfort-

able nightly quarters both for himself and prisoner and for their mounts.

Had anyone been by to see, he would have been surprised to observe Boer Geoff and his prisoner tossing up for first sleep, and when Geoff had won the toss, would have been still more bewildered to see the prisoner, armed with the rifle of his jailer, mount guard, while the latter stretched himself beneath a protecting boulder and abandoned himself to helpless slumber.

Half-way through the night the prisoner awoke his captor, and, presenting him with the weapon, took his turn at sleeping. The sight would have charmed a philanthropical spectator, who would doubtless have concluded that the Millennium had begun to arrive within hail.

Nevertheless, it was fortunate that Geoff's turn had come to watch, when, soon after dawn, a small party of Boers rode swiftly along the road, going towards Ladysmith, and, seeing the two horses grazing, dismounted in order to catch and annex them, believing them to have wandered from Heaven-knew-where.

Geoff could not afford to see his splendid

mount and Hugh's useful beast commandeered before his very eyes within twelve hours of the start. He therefore hailed the Boers.

"Hullo, there!" he called out; "let those horses alone!"

"Thunder!" exclaimed a Boer; "there's an owner, after all. Who are you, there, and what are you doing on the veldt?"

"I've taken a prisoner and his horse," said Geoff; "found the silly fool lost, and he surrendered to me without a blow."

"I see. Where are you taking him to, then?"

"Harrismith—they can send him on by train from there, or hang him for all I care, so long as they don't hang the horse."

"Probably he's one of the Nicholson's Nek fellows. What in thunder is the uniform he's wearing; and how does he come to have a horse?"

"Must have been a trooper in one of the colonial corps," said Geoff. "He has a horse, that's enough for me."

"You're not going to let him ride it, though, surely?" said the fellow; "you'll be a fool if you do. Make him run."

"Catch me letting him ride. I shall lead his horse and he shall run alongside. Do you take me for an idiot?"

"Come on, Piet; you'd talk all day if you were allowed!" shouted an impatient Boer who had ridden a few paces on; and Piet, to Geoff's relief, grinned and departed, leaving the brothers with one danger on the right side of their account; to the relief, also, of Hugh, who had shammed asleep throughout the conversation, deeming this the safest course, since he understood nothing of what was said.

"I suppose you would have told me in English if I had had to get up and break anybody's head?" he remarked.

Nevertheless, it was deemed wiser to lie hid for the whole of that day, and to travel in this dangerous locality only by night.

CHAPTER VII

USEFUL SERVICE

THE two scouts had not proceeded far from their hiding-place near the Tugela next evening when they reached a spot where one road branches to the right towards Ladysmith, while the other, that which leads straight on, or slightly to the left, passes through the Van Reenen Pass, and so on to Harrismith. Of these two, the latter should unquestionably have been the route chosen. But both brothers paused, as with one consent.

"I must say I *should* like just to get a glimpse of Ladysmith," said Hugh. "The difficulty would be the horses; we could creep in easily enough on our feet, or on our waistcoats if necessary."

"Yes," said Geoff reflectively. "I wonder," he continued, after a minute or two, "whether

I dare, or whether it would be too great a risk"— he paused.

"Well, what?" laughed Hugh. "What infernal impertinence are you devising now, Geoff? asking old Joubert to hold your horse while you go and have a look at the town?"

Geoff laughed also. "Not Joubert," he said; "but really I don't see why I should not get somebody else to keep an eye on the horses—some Boer, of course, I mean—while we go on."

"My good man, where do I come in?" said Hugh. "You couldn't pretend you were taking your prisoner with you on a scouting job; you'd have to leave me with the horses, at the mercy of some Boer. No, thanks!"

"You wouldn't appear when I took in the horses, of course. I should go to the picket, and say I had smashed an English scout and bagged his horse, and would they kindly keep an eye on both horses while I did a bit of foot scouting? There are plenty of outposts within half a mile of us now; asleep, most of them, I'd bet! We might ride up close to the nearest we happen to come across on the way to

Ladysmith, and before they saw *you*, you could slip off and wait for me, while I took the horses on and left them in charge; then I'd join you again."

"Upon my word, Geoff, it wouldn't be a bad plan if you are *absolutely* certain you can play the Boer well enough to pass. You look so horribly young, and, well as you talk Dutch, you might easily be spotted."

"My Dutch is safe," said Geoff; "and, as for looking young—half their fellows are quite as young as I am—I'm twenty."

"Well, try it then; I feel worked up for a spree to-night," said Hugh. "Only, for Heaven's sake be careful!"

So the venturesome pair rode softly towards Ladysmith, now distant about seven miles, and before they had ridden many minutes they stopped, for they heard in the distance the unmistakable sounds that told of a laager near—horses stamping and occasionally neighing, and a human voice at intervals.

"There'll be an outpost somewhere just here," said Geoff. "Wait for me among these boulders; I'll come back for you within a few minutes; if I'm not back in an hour you'll

know I've gone to Pretoria to join Bunny, and you'd better get back home."

"Don't play any giddy tricks, and you'll be all right," whispered Hugh; "I'll wait here."

Geoff rode cautiously on, leading Hugh's horse, and presently was challenged by a sleepy voice.

"Look here," said Geoff, "I'm scouting; I've killed a sneaking Englishman and bagged his horse. I want to get closer in, and the horses hamper me; will you keep an eye on the beasts if I leave them with yours?"

"Fill my pipe for me and I will," said the Boer. "The horses are back there on the kopje. Give these to the groom there—kick the fool if he's asleep."

Geoff offered his 'baccy pouch. "That's English," grinned the Boer; "I suppose it was the *rooinek* scout's before you knocked him on the head?"

"Yes," said Geoff, grateful for the suggestion. "I must get a Boer pouch!" he reflected.

Geoff left the horses and thanked his friend.

"There are some of our fellows mounting a gun a couple of miles on," said the Boer, "on a hillock to the left of the road. It's a good gun,

but *verdomte* heavy, they said when they passed. There was a German with them, swearing like the Evil One."

Geoff made a note of this fact. It struck him that here was something more than an excuse for paying a visit to the British camp.

He returned along the road for Hugh, giving a low whistle, their own family call, well known to both—a simple strain, something like the pipe of a golden oriole. Out came Hugh at once.

"Well," he asked excidedly, "how has your impudence succeeded?"

"Perfectly; not a hitch! There's nothing like brass in this world, take my word for it!" Then Geoff described his adventure, including the information incidentally acquired as to the party of Boers at this moment employing themselves in mounting a gun.

"Why, man, things couldn't be better!" exclaimed Hugh. "We'll just look in and see how the German and his gunner fellows are getting on, and then hurry off to the camp and tell them about it; we'll do a good turn to our own side, after all, before starting off to fetch Bunny."

So the pair of scouts left the road, and ran and crept and ran again, and walked a hundred yards, then sprinted once more where they could, keeping as much as possible under cover, though it was dark and the place seemed clear of the enemy, excepting here and there an outlying picket, whom they took care to avoid. Once one of these good fellows took a chance shot at them, or rather at the sound they made, but as he did not see them, his bullet may have flown within a quarter of a mile of them, and may not.

"There you are, that'll be the gun kopje," said Hugh at length, as well as he could for panting. "Better go on alone, in case you're seen by their patrol. Have a good look and count the men engaged, then come back for me here."

Geoff nodded, and crept carefully forward. For half a minute or so Hugh watched him creep and glide among the boulders and scrub. Then he disappeared.

Ten minutes passed, and Hugh began to think a full hour had gone by. Then at last Geoff came stealthily back — Hugh met him. Geoff's finger was at his lip.

"Hush!" he said, "they're only a quarter of a mile away. They are still struggling with the gun—a huge, long, heavy thing. They'll be four or five hours over the job yet. We've plenty of time to tell the General at Ladysmith, if we can get at him. There are seventy or eighty men employed."

"Jove! we ought to have them 'on toast,' and the gun too," said Hugh excitedly. "Come along, we won't waste a minute."

Without another word whispered the two brothers started at a quick run — over this hillock and up the next, and along a short, level piece and more hills, till, suddenly, they were brought up by an English voice—

"Who goes there?"

"A friend," said Hugh, stepping forward.

"Steady a minute, friend, then, and say what's your business. Why, one of you's a Boer!"

"Only a sham one, mate," said Geoff. "I'm a scout—we both are. Have you anyone you could send back into camp on horseback? We've a little job on that the General may like to know of."

"I don't know, I'm sure, whether I ought to

let you pass—a feller dressed in Boer's kit! How do I know you're not a darned Boer scout up to some devilry or other?"

"Well, keep me here, then, and let my brother go forward. Or, keep us both, and send one of your fellows back with a note from us."

"Well, pass, then; you seem all right. Stop! give me your rifle to show you're square."

"Take it, by all means. Now step out, Hugh; we'll be in camp in twenty minutes."

After sundry short delays, thanks to the alertness of the various sentries passed on the way to the General's quarters, the brothers at last succeeded in getting a message conveyed to the commanding officer by an *aide-de-camp*.

This latter gentleman was somewhat astonished to perceive that one of those who desired to speak to him was a Boer. But he was soon persuaded that this was but the outer shell of a Boer, and the kernel good British flesh and blood.

"But why is one of you dressed as an Englishman and the other as a Boer?" he asked.

Hugh laughed, and explained that this arrangement was convenient for their purposes.

"You see, sir," he said, "when we want to enter our own camp I can pretend the Boer is my prisoner; and if we want to collect information in theirs, I become *his* prisoner."

"Highly ingenious," laughed the officer; "but mind you don't get sent to Pretoria without your Boer fellow one of these times, when you accompany him into their quarters. You run considerable risk, both of you! However, I'll tell the General what you say. If he believes your tale he may send out a squadron of Hussars."

The General himself came out, anxious to see the men themselves before deciding whether to believe them or no. He gazed curiously at one and the other.

"Didn't someone point you out to me at Reitfontein, or after, and tell me you had done some good scouting with Yule's troops?" he said, addressing Geoff.

Geoff blushingly acknowledged that he had had the privilege of being complimented on that occasion. This had occurred just after his separation from Bunny. Then the C.O. whis-

pered something to his *aide-de-camp*, who departed quickly.

"I will take your names, gentlemen," said the General; "and in case you have given useful information I shall be glad to remember them."

He wrote the names Hugh Bigby and Geoffrey Bigby in his pocket-book.

"You will guide the Hussars to the spot in which you say the gun is now being mounted," he said. "You are sure you can return to it without mistaking the way?"

Both brothers hastened to give the assurance, and the General, after wishing them good-night, and bidding them wait where they were for the troopers, returned to his quarters.

In a wonderfully short space of time a company of infantry and a squadron of Hussars were assembled, ready to make a start.

"Now, guides, off you go!" said the officer commanding. "And, look here, no nonsense about forgetting the way or anything of that sort; if I have reason to think you are up to any tricks, you shall have a bullet apiece before you're a minute older, mind that!"

"All right, Colonel Evans," said Geoff;

"you ought to know me better than that—I'm Geoffrey Bigby. I didn't play you any tricks with Yule's column, did I?"

"Lord, youngster, I didn't know you! Why, what a realistic Boer you have made yourself!" laughed the Colonel, now recognising an old acquaintance. "Come—*you'll* be all right, anyhow! Lead on; we have to be so careful now, you see."

The nightly promenade proved a brilliant little affair, one in which both the Hussars and the Branshires covered themselves with glory; for the gun was presently dismounted and partially destroyed, and the seventy Boers sent flying to all points of the compass—and this with scarcely a casualty to the British troops engaged. When all was over, Colonel Evans did not forget to express his thanks, and those of the General, to the two guides to whose good offices the successful little sortie was due.

"The General will be glad to thank you for himself next time you come into camp," he said; "and I shall take care that your services are not forgotten, however long you may elect to be absent."

With which genial words the Colonel and his merry men returned joyously to camp, well pleased with the result of their little night enterprise.

"I'm glad we had that one little look in!" said Hugh. "Now we must hurry up and get back our horses. What if we find our old friends at the patrol camp have stampeded, like these others, taking our beasts with them?"

"Then we should have to go on foot, or by train," laughed sanguine Geoff, "unless we could steal another pair."

But the horses were safe enough, and Geoff concocted a cock-and-bull story of how he had met a body of English troops close to Ladysmith, evidently making a sortie, and how he had hurried by another road in order to warn the gunner fellows on the kopje, but had unfortunately been just too late.

CHAPTER VIII

A RUDE SHOCK

WHEN Harrismith was reached on the following evening, Hugh Bigby, the prisoner of the party, was on foot and affecting to be weary and footsore.

The place, like most of those passed through by them during their march northwards, was almost deserted, excepting by women and children and a few old men. Geoff had to answer innumerable questions, for the women swarmed round to examine the prisoner, addressing to him uncomplimentary remarks, and laughing in his face. Some informed Hugh that if they had their way they would lynch him to the nearest street lamp, together with all the rest of the Queen's soldiers that they could lay hands on. Hugh did not understand a word they said, and smiled blandly back at them.

"What are they saying?" he asked Geoff.

"They're saying what a good-looking chap you are, and want to know if you're a married man," laughed Geoff. "Don't you go and be persuaded to choose one and settle down here for evermore."

"Sorry I can't, I'm sure, but I'm a prisoner —tell them so," said Hugh, highly pleased with the joke, and entirely unsuspecting of the real tenor of their remarks. He nodded and smiled at the ladies, however, and said, "Good-morning" in Dutch, the time being evening, but this was about all the Dutch he knew. Some of the women made faces in return for his genial salutations. These, Hugh concluded, were the jealous ones.

There was no difficulty about finding a comfortable lodging, and this night was passed in luxury, after a good supper had been discussed by both men.

In the morning Hugh limped out of the town as he had limped into it, while Geoff rode alongside and led the spare horse. There were very few abroad so early to see them, and no Boer ladies to make rude remarks, destined to be considerately trans-

lated by an indulgent captor in order to spare the feelings of his captive.

"We're doing it pretty comfortably so far, eh?" said Geoff. "There doesn't seem much difficulty about the business, does there?"

"I must say you do the Boer jolly well," admitted Hugh; "but you'll have to use all your wits before you've done, or I shall be surprised. Remember, this is the Free State we're in, and they may be sharper in the Transvaal."

Half a mile from town the prisoner jumped upon his horse and rode comfortably forward with his companion—the lion and the lamb travelling together in peace and accord.

But before midday the enterprising pair met with an adventure which gave them what is colloquially known as "a jar," and caused them to make certain modifications in their mode of procedure.

Round the corner of the road along which they were peacefully riding, each smoking his pipe, there suddenly met them a troop of fifty or sixty Boers hurrying to the front, led by a field-cornet.

"Halt!" exclaimed the latter officer, appar-

ently much astonished. "What is the meaning of this? Surround them, men!"

"This is my prisoner, Mr. Field-Cornet," said Geoff, somewhat surprised and dismayed, but determined not to lose his head.

"Your prisoner, and riding! What for a *verdomte* fool are you, then, to allow a prisoner to ride? Can't you understand that he will escape you that way?"

"I am stronger than he is by this much," said Geoff, tapping his Mauser barrel.

"The deuce! idiot that you are! he jumps behind a boulder and he is gone! Get off the horse, you English fellow—you've got to run. Take the beast, one of you. Now, you, who are you, and where are you going with him?"

"Pieter Kuyper, of Huyte's commando, Meyer's division," said Geoff readily, having prepared all this beforehand. "I'm taking him to Pretoria; he is one of those you Free Staters so cleverly caught at Nicholson's Nek, but this one was lost on the veldt for several days."

"Stop! Why are you travelling this way and not by rail? You are wasting time, if not

skulking. Don't you know that every man is wanted at the front?"

"I shall be back very soon, officer—I am not a skulker," said Geoff, assuming a convincing air of offended nobility; "but I caught him some miles from camp, and was bringing him along until I should find someone, like yourself, who could give me a railway travelling order."

"That's easily done," said the field-cornet, and he wrote forthwith upon a scrap of paper the order for Pieter Kuyper to convey his prisoner to Pretoria, and to return himself, free of charge, to the front.

"See you waste no time in returning," he said, "or, by thunder! there'll be questions asked."

"You have forgotten to pay me anything for the prisoner's horse, field-cornet," said Geoff, boldly; but that gentleman had by this time ridden out of hearing, though some of his Boers laughed loudly when they heard the remark.

"Apply for it when you get back," someone shouted; "you'll find it carefully kept for you in the Commandant's own stables!"

Half a minute later the party had disappeared.

"There goes your horse, old man," said Geoff, looking after them "and thank God they didn't take you too. I was afraid they would."

"What was it all about?" asked Hugh; and when he had had the conversation explained to him, he, too, was of the opinion that they had come well out of a great danger. "They've commandeered the beast," he said. "I suppose they've a right, according to all one reads."

"But then, the next fellow may commandeer mine," said Geoff, "and we shall have to walk. At anyrate, we've a free ticket by rail," he added.

"No. I don't like the idea of going by train," said Hugh; "one get's there too quickly, before one's plans are fully made."

Prisoner and captor took turns to ride the horse; but since it would look too suspicious for the English soldier to ride while his Boer guard walked alongside, Hugh mounted only at such times and in such places as were considered perfectly safe, as, for instance, when there was a clear stretch of straight road and

no signs of travellers upon it for a considerable distance ahead.

But once, before evening, they were caught in the act of changing.

Hugh had been taking his turn in the saddle when half a dozen Boers hove suddenly in view, joining the main Standerton road from a side road, and coming down at a hand canter to meet them, headed, as before, by a field-cornet, who had probably beaten up the men from some out-of-the-way locality where they had successfully ignored, up to this time, the trumpet's blast. The cornet seemed an ill-tempered person, or maybe he was angry.

"What is this *hocus pocus*? Did I see the prisoner riding upon your horse?" he said.

"He is footsore," replied Geoff, "and I gave him a short ride in mercy—especially as the horse is his own, or was."

"Then you are a fool, my friend," said the field-cornet; "and you are not to be trusted with a prisoner, nor yet with a horse—certainly not with both together. Where are you taking him to, and why not by rail?"

"We shall join the railway at Standerton. I am all right with the prisoner—if he attempted

to play the fool I could shoot him in a minute."

"You will be safer walking, nevertheless. Take the horse, one of you there! Now, burgher, your name and farm, and the horse shall be restored to you after the war, or, at anyrate, you can claim to have it restored; though, since you say it belonged to the Englishman, I doubt if you would get satisfaction."

Geoff gave his name and address: "Pieter Kuyper, of Rosengarten Farm, Potchefstroom District."

The field-cornet took it down. Then he gave Geoff a receipt for "one horse commandeered—captured from the English by Pieter Kuyper."

"Where's your own horse?" he asked.

"Shot during the fighting on October 26th," said Geoff readily. "I have been on foot ever since until Providence sent me this fool and his horse."

"Well, old man!" said Hugh, when the officer and his men had ridden away in a cloud of dust, "it seems to me those field-cornet fellows are just about as cool as they

make 'em. They'd commandeer the bed from under you if they thought it a nice one."

"It seems our fellows—or our guns—have been dead on the horses, and they're hard up for mounts—that's what it means," said Geoff. "We're in for a forty- or fifty-mile walk, and then train from Standerton—that's *our* programme."

"There's not much hardship in that," Hugh laughed, "especially as you'll have to carry the gun, not I."

Geoff sternly bade his brother remember his place, and not presume to laugh at him.

"You are my prisoner," he explained, "and if you are impertinent to me I shall make it extremely unpleasant for you."

"I'm bigger than you, and I'd punch your head for twopence!" said the prisoner; whereupon his stern jailer announced that he would get his companion lynched at the nearest village if he were not careful.

"They have been quite inclined to do it once or twice already, you know," he added.

Hugh did not know this, fortunately for his peace of mind; but had he been familiar with the Dutch language, as spoken in this country,

he would have comprehended that the remarks of the women in all the farms and villages he had passed through—as well as at Harrismith—had been the reverse of complimentary. Geoff had never informed him of this fact, being careful, to a fault, of his prisoner's feelings.

But at this moment the said prisoner was in high good humour, and not inclined to be awed by the sternness of his captor; he insisted upon that genial Dutchman producing the sandwiches, and sitting down to share the same. As a matter of fact, Hugh was greatly relieved to find that Geoff passed so well as a Boer, for he had in his heart of hearts been somewhat sceptical of his ability to do so. Each interview with parties of the enemy helped to convince him that Geoff had been quite justified in his sanguine expectations—the project was working wonderfully.

So the two sat down and enjoyed a square meal. The loss of their horses did not very much matter at this point in the enterprise; for though in the first part of their journey the animals had been indispensable, here their loss was no more than a regrettable incident. But,

unfortunately, in the midst of their meal, while they sat and discussed hopefully sundry projects for the course of action to be taken at Pretoria —after Hugh should be shut up in prison, and Geoff left outside to devise and carry out the plan for releasing both him and Bunny—a rude shock was in preparation for the conspiring brothers. For with a great clatter of hoofs, and with much swearing in Dutch, there suddenly rode up from behind them the field-cornet of half an hour ago. He led Geoff's horse, and his violent language was caused by the objections of that animal to being hauled along by the bridle at the flank of the cornet's own horse.

"Ha! here you are!" cried the field-cornet. "That is good, Pieter Kuyper, for my conscience has rebuked me since I left you alone with this great prisoner-fellow here."

"Why—I shall be all right with him," said Geoff, his heart sinking, nevertheless, for he feared he knew not exactly what. "I see you have brought back my horse," he continued boldly—"you ought never to have commandeered it, my friend."

"Oh, to the deuce with you!" said the

cornet, laughing disagreeably. "I have brought the horse—yes, but you must walk all the same. I have reflected that I was wrong to allow you to go alone with this prisoner to Standerton; you ought never to have taken him out of Harrismith. Why should you, when there is a railway? Do you know what it seems to me, my friend, that you are doing? You are spending as much time as possible in conveying your prisoner by road towards Pretoria in order to shirk your duty at the front."

"When I meet you in the trenches you shall see that I am no shirker," said Geoff. "But why have you come to tell me this?"

"I have not. I have come to take your English jail-bird back to Harrismith, where he shall be sent off by rail in safety, and to bid you hasten back to the front as quickly as you can get there, and report yourself to me. You can ask for Field-Cornet Arendson at the Frankfort commando, outside Ladysmith. When you report yourself, I shall judge whether you have come as quickly as you ought; and when I have decided that point, I shall know whether I should complain of

your conduct to the commandant of your division or overlook your foolishness."

"It is I that shall complain," said Geoff, dismayed by the turn events were taking, yet resolved to resist to the last. "You are exceeding your functions, Mr. Field-Cornet. This is my prisoner, and it is my duty to carry him into safety. You have no right to interfere."

"Show me your authority for absenting yourself from the commando to which you belong? Ah! I see by your face that you have none—you are acting on your own responsibility. Take care, my friend, Piet Kuyper. Shirking is a dangerous game and punishable by death. I might shoot you if I were satisfied of your guilt; but I shall give you the chance of reporting yourself within two days. If you fail to do so, you shall be shot when found."

Geoff was silent, wondering whether it would be safe to shoot this man on the spot before he could separate him from Hugh, as he clearly intended to do.

"Come, tell the *rooinek* to prepare, and be sharp," continued the cornet. "Does he speak Dutch?"

"Not a word," said Geoff. "You must tell him what you want in English."

"I know little English. If you speak the language, tell him. Come—waste no more time."

Geoff was glad to hear this, for it enabled him to speak freely to his brother; though, since he did not altogether trust the cornet, who might know English better than he pretended, he thought it prudent to speak very rapidly, in order to render his words more difficult to follow.

"This rascally Jack-in-office," he said, "is going to carry you off. Don't look so dismayed, or he may smell a rat. He says he will send you off by train from Harrismith. Shall I shoot him as he stands? Should I be justified?"

Hugh stood silent awhile, too stunned to speak. He thought hard for a moment.

"Don't shoot him," he said. "The other fellows would hear and come back. Wait about here. I sha'nt be with him long. I'm going to give him the slip. If I don't come, follow me by train."

"What's all the talk about?" said the

cornet. "You seem too friendly with your prisoner, my man!"

"I was telling him he might give me a sovereign or so for treating him kindly," said Geoff; "but he refuses to pay me. Give me a receipt for him and take him, Mr. Cornet. I may as well enjoy the credit of having caught him when these things are counted up afterwards."

"You can have your receipt," said the cornet, scribbling the required paper, "and be hanged to you! Now then, you Englishman, up on saddle there! Say it in English, curse you!" he added to Geoff angrily.

Geoff did as requested.

"Mount, old man," he said; "and for Heaven's sake come back!"

Hugh mounted and rode off. He seemed to take no notice of Geoff, but he grinned over his shoulder as he rode away, and said—

"Don't fret. *Au revoir!*"

But as Geoff saw him disappear he gave way to a fit of deep despondency.

"I ought to have shot the blackguard," he reflected. And a little later, feeling yet more depressed, he blamed himself more vigorously.

"Fool and ass that I was," he thought, "I ought to have shot him dead. It's war-time; I should have been amply justified. *Idiot* that I was!"

Then he ran back along the road in the wild hope of pursuing the field-cornet on foot and dragging him from his saddle. But Boer and Briton were already out of sight.

CHAPTER IX

"WAR'S WAR"

WHEN Geoff realised that he might as well pursue the wind as attempt to overtake that officious field-cornet and his prisoner by running after them on foot, he sat down by the roadside and fairly groaned. Hugh would find no immediate opportunity to shake off his escort; they would come up presently with the body of Boers which formed the cornet's little commando, and then it would be too late. He was gone; and Heaven only knew what would be done with him, and where he would be imprisoned, and how he was ever to be found again.

"Helpless and senseless idiot that I am," Geoff groaned. "I have lost both Hugh and and Bunny by my blundering. Why was I ever born only to be such a hopeless failure in everything I undertake?"

"One requires much quicker wit than I have in order to get on," he reflected sadly; and presently: "If only I had had the presence of mind to shoot the rascal straight away, instead of weakly allowing Hugh to be carried off by a lantern-jawed field-cornet, just because he shouted at me like a schoolmaster at a naughty schoolboy! Oh! . . ."

Geoff ground his teeth, and imagined a thousand unspoken maledictions upon the head of the field-cornet. The only consoling thought was that Hugh carried a revolver. It might possibly strike him, before it was too late, that both he and Geoff had behaved like unspeakably senseless beings in sparing the field-cornet and allowing him to ride off with Hugh in tow—a kind of captive bear, with a ring through his nose, five times as strong as his keeper, if he only knew it and possessed the sense to exert his strength and free himself from captivity.

The more Geoff reflected, the greater grew his depression and his indignation against himself for losing the game by sheer incompetent play.

"I don't deserve to win," was the up-

shot of his reflections, "because I'm an ass!"

Presently, when he had arrived at this conclusion, Geoff lay down in the shade to think what was to be done in order to make the best of an extremely bad and mismanaged job. And he had just begun to dose in his weariness and misery when the clatter of a horse galloping up the road awoke him, and he started to his feet imagining he knew not what new disasters.

But Fortune was kinder than he thought; for a cheery voice sang out his name, and Hugh came tearing up the hill, riding as though all the legions of evil were at his horse's heels.

"Jump up behind me, old man," he cried, pulling up for an instant. "I'll tell you all about it as we go. I daresay no one will be after us; but it's just as well to be on the safe side."

In spite of the joy of his heart and the intense relief that flooded over his spirit upon seeing Hugh safe and free, Geoff felt ashamed of himself for his late despondency. It seemed like a mistrusting of his brother's acuteness as

well as a kind of non-faith in the Providence upon which Geoff steadfastly relied.

"I might have known you would work it all right," he said, as he vaulted up behind Hugh. "I've been an awful fool, old man; had the black-hump badly. I thought you'd gone, and that I ought to have banged off at that chap."

"No; you were right not to. The sound of shooting might have brought up those other fellows. Besides, I thought I could manage without—and, you see, I have."

"Well, tell me how you did it. I'll keep a lookout behind to see if we're followed, while you go on with your story."

"You remember that rocky path over the top of that big kopje overlooking the ravine down to the Cornelius River, about two miles from where you waited? You know, just where I said if the horse slipped one might have a nasty header down the precipice? Well, the cornet chap made me go on ahead there, which was just what I wanted, for it fell in with the pretty little plan I had made for him. I rode on ahead, as per instructions; but I went faster than he liked to follow, and

he shouted at me in Dutch. I suppose he was telling me not to be a darned fool, but ride like a sensible person over such a break-neck passage. I was sprinting for a wider place I saw ahead of me; and when I came to this I suddenly turned my horse right round and dashed back again up the pass to meet him. He was then only five yards away at most, and he hadn't time to get his rifle up at me—it hung on his back by a strap—though I saw him grabbing for it. Well, here I am."

"I see," said Geoff; "you took the inside position, and there wasn't room for two."

"His fool of a horse did the trick: it put its head down, and tried to turn and bolt out of our way. He'd have gone over the edge anyhow, without the bit of a shove we gave them in passing, for his horse's hind-legs were over the edge already when we came up. He made a grab at my bridle as we went by, but he missed it. I'm sorry for the fellow, but war's war. If anybody wants him they'll have to look about a thousand feet down. He was dead long before he got there."

"Poor chap! Yes, war's war. Perhaps he'd have died anyhow before it's finished;

still it's a beastly end, even for a rascally, thieving field-cornet. I suppose you're afraid his men may come back to look for him? I don't think they'll go far. If he doesn't turn up I shouldn't wonder if they sneak back to their farms—they seemed a bit unwilling to go, I thought."

"Shirkers, beaten up at the last moment. Well, let them return to their farms. The more of them that do that, the sooner the war 'll be over."

The brothers did not keep up their rapid flight for very long. They could see to a considerable distance behind them, and there was no sign of pursuing Free Staters; so presently they pulled up and gave the horse a rest, for galloping up a rise double-loaded is breathless work.

The rest of that day was quite eventless, and by the evening a farm near Vrede was reached. Here the women-folk—for, with the exception of a few Kaffirs, there was not a man about the place—were kindly disposed. They seemed anxious to hear the last news from Ladysmith, and as Geoff was as anxious to oblige them in return for hospitality re-

ceived, he gave them a strictly Free State version, piling on the glory—as he afterwards expressed it—on behalf of the Free Staters and their doings to such an extent that he succeeded in making all present very proud and happy, and ready to dispense the best of everything they had to offer. Geoff supped well that night, and slept luxuriously, doing in both these departments very much better than his unfortunate prisoner, who was locked up in the stable with a plate of scraps to eat, and a bundle of straw to lie upon.

Had he known the disposition of his hostesses towards him as well as Geoff did he would have been grateful for even such small mercies as these, for it was only at Geoff's earnest solicitations that poor Hugh received any food at all; most of the women were for letting him starve upon a crust of bread.

"I must keep him alive, you see," Geoff pleaded, "rascally *rooinek* though he is, for I'm responsible for him, and have to deliver him in safety at the railway station at Standerton. He starved for three days, poor chap, after Nicholson's Nek, trying to get back to

his people. I told you about Nicholson's Nek — thunder! you should have seen your Free Stater fellows there! These Englishmen couldn't stand up to them at all—couldn't show a head over their little earthworks but it had a couple of bullet-holes for eyes and another for a mouth! Your people can shoot, and that's a fact!"

"I should like to take a thong to him, and let him sup on *sjambok*," said a strapping Boer wench. "What do they come bothering around here for, drawing off our best lads from the farms to teach them wisdom?"

"Ah, I expect your lad would rather be back at the farm here than whipping Englishmen outside Ladysmith!" said Geoff. "Well, take comfort—they won't want much more of it, and then your boy'll come back. What's his name?"

"Jan Petersen," said the blushing girl. "We were to be married at New Year—will he be back by then, do you think?"

"Long before that! Jan Petersen, did you say?" said Geoff bracingly. "I know him well—I saw him by Ladysmith! A splendid fighter, by thunder! They say he's to be the

next field-cornet in place of—in place of—I forget the fellow's name"—

"Van Zaandyg?" asked the girl eagerly. "Is that the name? It was he came and fetched our lads away. Is he dead, then?"

"Well, I don't think he's dead," said Geoff, feeling that one of the audience might be interested in this gentleman, and that therefore it would be a pity to kill him outright; "but he has done well, and will probably get a step very soon."

"What, a commandant?" said someone, much impressed.

"So they say at the front," said Geoff, wagging his head wisely.

Geoff was in great form that night, and with a little encouragement might easily have promoted the relations and friends of all the ladies present to the very highest positions in the Free State army. But it grew late, and his imagination was allowed a rest until breakfast-time.

So successfully had he ingratiated himself in the favour of his hostesses, however, that luxuries of all sorts were pressed upon him for the day's consumption, and poor Hugh,

after all, had his share of good things; for Geoff brought away with him sufficient for half a dozen greedy persons, being determined that destiny should atone to his brother for the scurvy treatment he had met with at the farm.

Standerton was reached without further adventure on the following evening, the two brothers entering the town in the orthodox fashion—Hugh as the weary, footsore prisoner tramping alongside his armed Boer escort, who addressed him with scant ceremony when in the hearing of passers-by, many of whom mocked and jeered at the Englishman, calling him names and abusing him both in Dutch and English.

As Hugh somewhat naturally remarked to his brother that evening, discussing their enterprise, which, on the whole, had prospered exceedingly well up to this point, the game was a more amusing one for Geoff than for himself.

"I don't know what it is that you say to me in Dutch when there are Boer chaps about," added Hugh; "but I should say you are being darned rude by the way they seem to enjoy your remarks."

"Be a wise fellow, and don't inquire into it too closely," Geoff laughed; "because where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be inquisitive."

"All right," said Hugh; "but if I ever get a chance I'll take it out of some of those Boer Johnnies for their impertinence."

"I can't encourage these wicked, vengeful feelings," said Geoff. "If I did I should be getting my own head punched for some of the insulting remarks I make about you."

"*Are* they so very insulting?" asked Hugh, grinning.

"You bet," said Geoff. "*Withering*, sometimes, if only you knew."

"By George! I'll learn Dutch then, and half-kill you the first time I understand any of your darned impertinence," laughed Hugh. "So look out, young feller, at the next secluded spruit."

CHAPTER X

PRETORIA!

BUT secluded spruits were done with for some time, for with this evening the road travelling ended, and the train journey commenced. At Standerton station the brothers realised more acutely than hitherto that they had not much more time to spend together in planning and scheming for the things which should follow Hugh's imprisonment.

Had they known it, their time was even shorter than they supposed; for Geoff expected to accompany his brother to Pretoria; but this little plan was suddenly and cruelly nipped in the bud when the train ran into the station. For in the train were other British prisoners from the front, in charge of half a dozen armed and rowdy Boers, who insisted upon Geoff joining their party, while

Hugh was to be crowded in with the forty or fifty unfortunate Britishers occupying the vans specially provided for them.

Geoff, disgusted, and somewhat concerned, yet determined to play his part to the end, was obliged to agree to this arrangement.

"I suppose I shall see my sheep at Pretoria?" he said. "I have to get a receipt for him."

"Shoot him into the van, and come in with us," said a half-drunken Boer. "Who cares whether they give you a receipt or not? We'll give you a dozen receipts. Have you any money?"

"A little."

"That's much more important. Well, you can get rum at the counter there. You're a newcomer, and may stand drinks round."

Geoff contrived to whisper to Hugh a warning that he should hint nothing about their affairs to his fellow-prisoners. Hugh winked in token that he had no intention of doing so.

"Get in, you dead-kop," said Geoff aloud in Boer English; "and don't die on the way, for I must have a receipt for you."

Then Hugh squeezed into the crowd of

mournful captives travelling towards their weary haven of enforced, undesired peace; and to the sub-accompaniment of muttered curses and sighs he heard from them the story of their misfortunes—it was all one story, for this vanload was the result of a single haul by the Boers, one of the results of the treacherous, wily tactics so successfully employed by the enemy during the earlier stages of the war.

Hugh's heart bled for these poor fellows—brave, gallant, eager soldiers who had gone forth full of the delight that a strong man feels in the prospect of a good fight and an anticipated victory, and whose martial ambition had been cut off in the bud, never more to blossom forth—during this war, at least.

"One hoped to get on and do something particular, and get spoken about and promoted," said a young fellow dismally, "and this is the end of it—oh, *curse* the bad luck of the whole business, and the villainous wiliness of these infernal Boer sneaks!"

"It would make a fellow blow his brains out, if they hadn't taken one's weapons away," said another.

"And if one didn't always feel there was just a faint chance of escaping somehow!" said a third, more sanguine.

Then someone asked Hugh how he had contrived to get himself caught, and Hugh, feeling that however permissible and even laudable it might be to deceive the enemy, it was not quite pleasant to lie to one's own people, steered as close to the truth as he could manage, contriving to convey the desired impression without actually making a false statement. Of course, this may be called prevarication, but as Geoff had very eloquently observed earlier in the day, or yesterday, "War's war." So Hugh explained that his capture had been effected after Nicholson's Nek, which was perfectly true; and that it had been effected by a field-coronet and a body of Boers—all of which was scrupulously veracious as far as it went; and, after all, it may fairly be left in the hands of a man situated as Hugh was, to decide for himself how far he need go in the telling of a story, and where it may be expedient to stop.

As for Geoff, being among enemies and

therefore under no conscientious restrictions as to telling the truth, he did not tell it, or anything like it. Indeed, he romanced very freely indeed, and enjoyed himself amazingly in the process.

Moreover the Boers found him a very entertaining companion; for Geoff was the best of mimics, and delighted his audience with very excellent imitations of some of the national celebrities, such as the President himself—a representation for which Geoff was justly renowned in Johannesburg—the great Cronje, and others.

"Where do you hail from?" asked one of the Boers in the carriage; "I seem to have seen you somewhere—you're not a farmer, I can see by your hands, and you speak like a town-liver, too."

"Tell me where you've been, and perhaps I shall be able to tell you where you saw me," said Geoff, now taking particular notice of the man. Suddenly he recognised him and started; it was the fellow with the scarred face with whom he had quarrelled at a wayside station on the way from Johannesburg. The man, to Geoff's vexation, observed him start.

"What, you recognise me too?" he said. "Where did we meet?"

"At Johannesburg, wasn't it? Aren't you Karl van Raden, one of the city police?" said Geoff, temporising.

"Not I—I'm a farmer, thank Heaven!" laughed the man. "When this cursed war is over I go back to my farm. I've been in Johannesburg, I may have seen you there. I seem to know your face, as I say, it's more like an Englishman's face than a Boer's; that comes of living among the Outlanders, no doubt."

"No doubt; I sit and write at a bank all day, you see, among English clerks, and, being a bit of a mimic, I suppose I've picked up some of their ways and looks—look here, here's an Englishman to the life, a rich Outlander reading the Dutch paper after Jameson's raid.' Geoff assumed a ridiculous expression and pose that evoked roars of laughter, thus changing the subject, which was an awkward one for him, and presently, feigning sleepiness, he closed his eyes and screwed up his face in pretended slumber. Geoff wished to think awhile, and was somewhat weary of the strain

of entertaining his fellow-passengers. It would have been awkward if the scarred fellow had recognised him, and the shock of his presence had somewhat disturbed him. Geoff felt that he must keep out of the fellow's way as much as possible, lest he should suddenly remember and suspect.

"Yet he could scarcely do that," he reflected; "for the last thing in the world that he would be likely to suspect would be that a Johannesburg refugee should be returning to Pretoria as a Boer, and actually depositing a British prisoner in quad."

This phenomenon would undoubtedly present unfathomable difficulties to anyone in the position of the scarred gentleman, should he be inclined to connect Geoff with the "difficult" English refugee at that wayside station. When at early morning the train stopped outside Johannesburg, *en route* for Pretoria, Geoff gazed in the direction of his old home, longing to know how it fared with a certain Boer maiden of whom he had heard nothing since the outbreak of the war. As a matter of fact, Vesta had written to him, according to her promise, but letters addressed from the Boer

cities to persons in Natal and Cape Colony took a very long time to reach their destination at this period, and sometimes never reached it at all.

If circumstances had permitted of his riding instead of travelling by train, Geoff would have contrived a visit to his fair lady; but this might have been a dangerous thing, and it was just as well for all parties that matters had shaped themselves differently.

How the place reminded him of that crowded afternoon of the flight from Johannesburg! That had been a memorable day indeed, memorable for its own historical associations, but most memorable in his mind for the short but delightful conversation with Vesta. That conversation had set his heart at rest for ever; nothing could ever be quite the same again since that little interchange of ideas; for a bright ray of light had illuminated his days since that hour, and must for ever illuminate them now that Vesta had promised to love him and be true to him.

"When shall I see her again, I wonder!" thought Geoff, somewhat sadly, as the train steamed out of the junction. "Not till the

war's over, I suppose, *unless*"— That word *unless* opened the door to a whole train of thoughts, thoughts so absorbing and—presumably—so exciting that Geoff lay back with flushed face, turning them over and over and endeavouring to shape them to his satisfaction.

"By Jove!" he muttered at length, "it really isn't a bad idea; the only thing is"—

And once more Geoff's thoughts went off at full cry, like a pack of hounds in pursuit of the nimble fox. The upshot of those thoughts will appear presently in due order; all that may now be known of them is that they seemed to please their author mightily—so much so, that one of his fellow-travellers awoke and asked him "why in thunder he was cackling and laughing to himself in such a manner as to shake the carriage and prevent others from sleeping?"

Geoff apologised, and explained that he had been thinking of something funny, which indeed was the case.

Pretoria looked wonderfully empty as the train at length reached the capital city, and prisoners and guards trooped out of their carriages upon the platform and marched

through the streets towards the prison-camp. Most of the Boers, like Geoff, possessed a horse, but some had been reduced by the operations of war to the status of foot-soldiers.

"What becomes of us when we've landed our prisoners?" asked Geoff of one of his companions.

"We give them up and then go back to the front," said the Boer. "That is, we are supposed to, but we are not such fools, most of us, as to return immediately without first looking up our friends and relations. I live at Potchefstroom, for instance, and it isn't likely I'm going back without having a look at my farm and the missus, and so on."

"Naturally," said Geoff. "I'm sick enough of the war; I should like to stay away altogether."

"Ah, they won't let you do that, my son," laughed the Boer, "unless you can persuade them to take you on at one of the forts or prisons here at Pretoria. If you want that or anything else out of the authorities, though, you'd better be prepared for disappointment, for everyone seems to be in the kind of humour that whatever you ask him for he'd rather give

you the opposite. Ah, that's the prison-camp, I expect! Look at the long sheds within the high palings; I'm told these are nicknamed 'Ladysmith Street,' 'Kimberley Street,' and 'Mafeking Street.' Some of them are pretty full of rednecks; we have over two thousand of the dogs under lock and key."

Geoff gazed with the greatest interest at the sheds and their surrounding defences. So far as he could see, there should not be much difficulty about getting out of such prisons as these. Doubtless the Boers trusted to the practical impossibility of a man in uniform escaping from the city and afterwards to the frontier, even though he should have contrived to elude the vigilance of his guards and scale the outer walls of the prison.

CHAPTER XI

BUNNY MAKES A DASH

AND now, having brought the two elder brothers in safety to Pretoria, it is time that poor Bunny should have his share of attention.

We left him, it may be remembered, in an extremely uncomfortable position, hanging on, bull-dog-like, to the waist of his burly captor, who utterly refused to be pulled from his saddle, and, holding on to his horse's mane with one hand, fought like a demon with the other to release himself from Bunny's grip. Bunny knew how to collar, as many an opposing three-quarter had been aware in the old days at Cubberly. But there are differences between collaring a mounted man and seizing the nimble and dodging three-quarter who stands upon his own feet — until you knock him off them. Moreover, Bunny had

happened upon a very sturdy Boer, which was bad luck for him.

"Let go, you mad redneck bull-dog!" cried the Boer angrily, "or I'll smash your kop with my rifle-butt."

"Let go yourself, or I'll pull you in several pieces! I swear I'll have you off," Bunny shouted back.

Then the two continued their struggle silently, both doing their utmost. The Boer tried to get at his rifle, in order to jab at Bunny's head with the butt, but Bunny's arms were round the strap, and he couldn't move it. Presently Bunny dragged his leg from over the horse's back. He had, at the outset, contrived to throw his left leg over behind the Boer; but now, getting his feet against the ribs of the animal, he obtained a tremendous purchase for pulling.

There could be but one result to this move. The Boer must certainly come over, but Bunny must just as certainly come with him, and would, probably, have the severer fall of the two.

So it happened.

The Boer felt in a moment that the strain of Bunny's tugs had suddenly and tremendously

increased. He made frantic efforts to retain his seat. He dropped the rifle, and clung to the horse's neck with both arms. He gasped, he swore, he struggled. But it was of no avail. The frightened beast, now doubly alarmed by the rush of galloping hoofs behind it—for the other horse was in full pursuit—put on speed every moment, and, in spite of its double burden, went like the wind.

Suddenly the Boer, with a loud curse, realised that he was worsted, and let go.

It was a bad fall for both. Bunny was underneath, and struck his head so violently against the stony ground that, though he automatically retained the tremendous grip he had taken of his man, and rolled over two or three times with him, he knew nothing about the matter.

As for the Boer, he, too, lay quiet for awhile, dazed by the fall. The two horses, after galloping straight on for a hundred yards or more, wheeled round, and presently subsided into a trot, coming close up to the fallen humans, and trotting two or three times in a circle about them, heads up and tails outstretched, concerned and inquisitive. Then, seeing that the men made no movement, they drew up, and

quietly began to graze, their bridles falling about their ears in an uncomfortable manner, and threatening to trip them up as they walked about in search of food.

The Boer was the first to recover his senses. He sat up, and looked about in a dazed fashion.

"Almachtig!" he muttered. "What has happened, and why sits a ton of lead upon my kop?"

His eye rested upon Bunny's unconscious form, whence it travelled to the horses quietly grazing close at hand.

"Aha!" he said. "I remember."

He raised himself stiffly to his feet. His horse lifted its head and neighed him a welcome—or, perhaps, its congratulations upon his recovery.

"Good beast," he muttered. "And Piet's beast, too. Whence came she then, and where is Piet? As for you," he continued, turning Bunny over with his foot, "you seem to be cooked, and serve you right for your silly trick. You might have done for me as well, and that would have been a pity."

Bunny gave a groan at this point, and the Boer looked keenly in his face.

"Alive, are you?" he muttered. "Then, with apologies, I will take precautions, for you are a *verdomte* awkward customer, though you seem but a lad." With which words the Boer deliberately took off the leather belt from Bunny's waist, and, using it as a strap, contrived to fasten his wrists very tightly together.

"Now we shall be all comfortable," he muttered.

And, judging rightly that Bunny would not be sufficiently recovered to get up and run away for some little while, he walked back towards the kopje which had been the scene of Bunny's sudden attack upon him, a good mile back along the road.

Here, hiding behind a rock, and watching Geoff's retreating figure, half a mile away, he came upon his companion, cursing, and swearing, and wishing to Heaven he had his rifle.

"Thunder!" exclaimed the other, "and mine is nearly bent double with my fall, or we could have had him nicely before he gets to that corner behind there."

Geoff, after waiting awhile in case Bunny should after all have got the better of his man and escaped, in which case he would quickly

return to this place, had climbed to the highest spot he could find and gazed thence in the direction taken by the galloping horses, one of which carried both Boer and Bunny.

From this point he could see far over the plain beneath, but unfortunately the exact place in which both Bunny and the Boer lay at that moment unconscious was hidden by a shoulder of the hill, and it did not strike him that both men and horses might be congregated at this spot. Concluding, very sadly, that Bunny had been carried away by this time far out of sight, and that it would be foolish to attempt pursuit on foot, he had dejectedly turned his steps towards Ladysmith, and had presently returned home to make those dispositions for the recovery of Bunny of which we know already.

Then the two Boers returned to their prisoner and found him wonderfully better—most disagreeably so, from their point of view.

As a matter of fact, Bunny began to recover consciousness almost as soon as his Boer had disappeared. He had awaked dazed, and in much pain, to find that his wrists were tightly bound together, and that he could not move his hands to his head.

Glancing up, he now perceived his captor walking away, and two horses apparently at his service. If only he could move his hands in order to mount and ride one of them! But for the fact of being bound at the wrists, Bunny would probably have been but semi-conscious for an hour or more, wondering what had happened to him and where he was, and why his head felt like a battered coal-scuttle. But finding himself unexpectedly tied up, his brain was forced, as it were, to act, and soon Bunny was wide enough awake to be striving his utmost to loosen the strap. The Boer had buckled it, tucking in the end of the strap, in and out, under the three or four thicknesses that encircled his wrists, but by means of violent tugging with his teeth, Bunny contrived to work the end gradually free. He judged, rightly enough, that the Boer would not be likely to remain away long, so that he worked in desperate haste, for not only must he be free, mount one of the horses, and be off before the return of the fellow, but also he must secure so good a start as to be out of range of his rifle.

So Bunny tugged and tore and got the end

of the strap out. But the buckle was an awkward matter to negotiate, and it took him much valuable time to unfasten it. Eventually, by screwing his left hand round over his right, at the wrist, he brought up reinforcements to assist the main army, which was his front teeth, and with the aid of his middle finger he contrived to get the buckle undone. But by this time he could see his man returning, with another, in the distance, and the strap must still be unwound, and a horse caught and mounted, and, to be fairly safe from rifle bullets, half a mile of veldt put between him and his enemies.

Half a minute now sufficed to free his hands altogether of the strap—all of which was done in a recumbent posture, lest the Boer should suspect and hurry back to prevent his designs.

Then, a free man, Bunny suddenly leapt to his feet. This was a dangerous moment, for he might easily be shot, he knew, while mounting, or before. Bunny did not know that one of these good Boers had lost his rifle to Geoff, and that the weapon of the second lay where he and his man had fallen, bent and useless.

Therefore he placed a horse between him

and the Boers, who were now a quarter of a mile away, shouting and running towards him. They had just realised how much better their prisoner must be feeling, since he was actually engaged in attempting to take his departure from among them without going through the ceremony of farewell.

Luckily for Bunny, their shouting engaged the attention of the horses, and these good beasts raised their heads and cocked forward their ears in an intelligent and faithful endeavour to ascertain what was required of them. Bunny seized the opportunity to capture one. He easily caught a trailing bridle and jumped upon the back of the nearest horse.

In another minute he had dug his heels into its sides, and was careering at full speed up the road. Presently he glanced back over his shoulder to see what his enemies were about.

To his great relief, neither of them appeared to have any intention of using his rifle in order to stop him. On the contrary, the two Boers seemed to be quarrelling, and even tussling, over the horse—perhaps arguing as to which possessed the prior right to it.

The fact was that each claimed the right.

One, somewhat naturally, because it was his own horse, the other because the prisoner was his by right of conquest, and, as he argued, if he had not captured the prisoner Piet's horse would not have stopped, but would have gone Heaven knows where over the veldt.

How the argument would have ended, and which contention was theoretically right, need not concern us. Neither did these questions concern Bunny. So far as we and he are concerned the argument ended with a short, fierce fight between the Boers, and with the victory of Bunny's burly friend, who quickly mounted, leaving behind him a few very personal remarks for his companion to digest until they should meet again, and galloped after Bunny with all speed.

Bunny led him round by the kopje, being anxious to pass the spot where he and Geoff had made their first attack upon their captors. It was just possible that Geoff might have been stunned with the fall, as Bunny himself had been; but there was no sign of Geoff. Then Bunny, with half a mile start, turned his horse in the direction in which he believed Ladysmith to lie, for Yule's retreating force was,

he knew, bound for the base camp, and the best thing he could do would be to make for his own people, just as, without a doubt, Geoff had done. At Ladysmith he would meet his brother once more, and they would start their scouting afresh. As for the burly Boer thundering along behind him, Bunny scarcely devoted a thought to him. He did not appear to have a rifle about him, therefore he did not matter. If he should happen to have chosen the better horse, and overtook him—why, there would be a fight, that was all, and a fight upon equal terms was a matter that never gave Bunny much anxiety.

CHAPTER XII

THE RACECOURSE

NEVERTHELESS, it would be the wiser course, he knew, to ride away from the fellow if he could, and Bunny rode as fast as he could get his animal to move.

He easily maintained his lead, being a lighter man than his pursuer, and the horses being about equal. But luck was on the side of the Boers this day; for before he had ridden half an hour he saw ahead of him, assembled about a farmhouse by the side of the road, a small commando of Boer troops refreshing themselves and chatting, some mounted, others on foot, their well-trained horses standing patiently behind them.

Bunny's pursuer shouted aloud. Bunny himself had already turned his panting horse out of the road, and was now careering over the stony veldt. But half a dozen fellows quickly fol-

lowed, while a couple of those standing dismounted in the open yard sent bullets after him.

Bunny bent forward over his animal's neck in order to offer as small a target as possible. He patted and caressed the panting beast, encouraging it with Dutch words. The good creature responded at once, making enormous efforts to increase its pace. But it was tired and winded, and without a doubt the fresh horses of the pursuing Boers would soon overtake it.

But the pursuing Boers were an indolent lot, and disinclined, it appeared, to engage in a long race over bad ground. They wanted to continue the meal whose enjoyment had been broken by this foolish race, therefore they adopted a quicker method of bringing about the capture of this flying redneck—they fired a volley after him.

Two of the bullets found their billet. One struck, scarcely more than grazing it, Bunny's left leg; the second hit his unfortunate horse behind the shoulder, and, with a plunge, it fell headlong, sending its rider, for the second time this day, turning somersaults upon the grass and stones of the veldt.

This, of course, finished the race, and long before Bunny could have regained his feet and mounted his horse — which for two reasons could not be done — he was surrounded and recaptured. Both the reasons against remounting were excellent: the first was that Bunny himself was dazed with the fall, and sat in smiling incomprehension of what was going on around him; and the second, that his horse lay as dead as last year's leaves close by its rider.

Bunny did not remember much of what followed these events. He had a dim recollection of being rather kindly treated by his new captors, who took him from his first friend after hearing particulars of his capture and escape, and brought him to their camp, where he was attended by a Boer surgeon, who was kind and skilful, and afterwards sent on by rail to Pretoria. His first captor was despatched, with the curt reply to the claims put in by him for rights over the prisoner, that, since he had been such a fool as to allow the man to escape once, he was not the person to be trusted with him a second time.

At Pretoria Bunny was put into the enclosure known as the Racecourse, a camp hastily

prepared outside the town for the increasing numbers of English prisoners almost daily brought in.

Here he passed his time in wretchedness. He was not treated unkindly; indeed, he might have claimed release by posing as a farmer and non-combatant, but that those who brought him in told terrible tales of his violence in the attempt to escape from his captors; in consequence of which reports he was not sent over the borders, like many other non-combatants, such as farmers and storekeepers, who had been taken while standing by their property in hopes that the tide of war might pass over and leave it intact.

As the days went by, the number of prisoners brought into Ladysmith Street rapidly increased. A huge consignment arrived after the Nicholson's Nek disaster—a crowd of dejected, disheartened men, who had bravely resisted calamity up to the last moment, and had succumbed to the inevitable only when there remained not a single cartridge among them to fire in the face of the Boer hosts that surrounded them.

Among these poor fellows came Jack Rosen-

thal, whom Bunny knew pretty well; and from him he presently learned the sad story of the disaster which had so moved every loyal Britisher and Colonial when the news of it appeared in the English newspapers: a naked, incomprehensible story, without detail and without explanation.

"My old governor 'll move heaven and earth to get me out of this," said Jack Rosenthal. "He'll probably offer old Paul a ransom of a hundred thousand pounds, or something of that sort; his ideas always roam to great sums of money, dear old chap, and he won't stint the cash to get me back, especially as I know he believes the Boers are going to hold us for several years."

"I hope he's wrong there, anyway," said Bunny, sighing. "Great Scot! Imagine living in this place for two years or more—waiting and waiting, always waiting to be released."

"Well, old man, if the governor buys me out, I'll get him to make an offer for you too," laughed Jack. "He can afford to buy out the lot of us if he chooses to do it."

"Thanks; I think I shall have a shot for myself before that happens, or maybe Geoff

will get me out somehow. Dash it! what an idiot I was not to escape when he did; that beast of a Boer stuck to his saddle like a limpet to a rock. I wish I knew what had become of Geoff! However, he's the slyest old rascal on the face of the earth, and if anyone can slip through the hands of a lot of Boer chaps and get right away, he's the man. Only, of course, he might have been shot before reaching camp. That's what makes me miserable: I simply pine to know for certain that he's all right."

"If he is, we may hear of him before long," laughed Jack. "He's the sort of fellow to come and fetch you, if I know him; it's the kind of enterprise he would like above all things in the world."

Bunny shook his head. "I don't see how it could be done," he said, "though I agree it's the kind of thing he would love to try. No, if he appears here, I'm afraid it will only be in the character of prisoner."

Many a conversation did Bunny and Jack Rosenthal enjoy during the days that followed Jack's arrival, and the subject of their debates was always the same—the feasibility or the

reverse of an attempt to escape from their "durance vile."

Bunny, following the dictates of his own too venturesome nature, was all for a "flutter," as he called it, for liberty, ignoring the frightful risks involved in such a proceeding.

"If we could only get out of this place, I don't see why the rest of the business shouldn't be fairly easy," he contended. "I am pretty good at talking Dutch. You can talk a bit, can't you?"

"Not much," said Jack. "I've been far less in the country than you have. My governor always had one foot in England, you see, while yours has always lived here. Why?"

"We might pass as Boers—we couldn't escape as English."

"My good chap, I couldn't do that—I should be spotted at once," said Jack, laughing.

"Stop a bit. You could have your face bound up, and pretend you'd had a bullet through your jaw—you wouldn't be expected to talk much then."

Jack Rosenthal roared with laughter.

"Upon my word, that's a deuced ingenious idea!" he said. "You're a bit of a genius,

Bunny—upon my word you are! But what about pretending to be Boers in an English uniform and an obviously English suit, such as you and I respectively are wearing?"

"We should think of some plan to overpower a couple of the guards at night, and bag their clothes. Make them drunk isn't a bad way—we've got money"—

Jack shook his head.

"They're too *slim* for that. We might overpower them sober, but I don't think we'd get them drunk."

"Well, we must study the beggars carefully, and see what's to be done. We might, perhaps, *buy* them, or one, and get him to provide us with clothes. There's no hurry — study their characters, and we may find a way out yet."

So it remained for the present, and Jack and Bunny set themselves to study their guards—without much success at first, for the opportunities of doing so were rare. But their studies were broken in upon by a notable and exciting circumstance. Late one afternoon, about a week or more after Jack's arrival, a fresh batch of prisoners were admitted.

Jack and Bunny were in the open space allotted to the inmates for exercise, when the gates opened and the new arrivals were shown in.

"New chums—poor beggars!" said Jack. "I wonder where *they* hail from, and how the war's going on!"

"Not too well, to judge from the number of prisoners that come in," began Bunny.

Then he suddenly broke off with an exclamation, his face flushed, and his eyes brightened.

"Good Heavens, Jack!" he muttered. "Look at that tall chap—the sixth in the line. Who is it? *Who* is it?"

"I seem to know his face"— Jack began.

"It is—it *is*!" cried Bunny, almost aloud. "It's my brother Hugh, Jack. I'm certain of it. You haven't seen him for ages, nor have I for two years; but I can swear to him. How could he have got here?"

"Poor chap!" said Jack. "He must have been bagged almost as soon as he landed. What ghastly luck! Don't look as though you recognised a friend, or they may keep us apart."

Meanwhile Hugh himself was peering about,

all eyes, most anxious to learn whether Bunny was in this enclosure or another. Presently he caught sight of his brother, and a smile of delighted recognition passed over his face, followed quickly by a warning look. Then Hugh turned away again.

"He expected to see me, and was looking out for me," muttered Bunny excitedly. "Do you think it can be part of some mysterious plot, Jack?"

Jack shook his head.

"Couldn't be," he said. "You can see that he's a prisoner. *He* can't get us out, any more than we can get him out."

Hugh, together with the rest of the prisoners brought in with him, was going through certain formalities at a table, where sat a Boer officer entering each in turn in the register.

Luckily Hugh remembered the name by which Geoff had gone throughout the enterprise, for he was asked, among other questions, who had captured him, and where. To this Hugh replied "Pieter Kuyper," and to the second part of the question, "after Nicholson's Nek." He was then asked his name, which he gave correctly, and his regiment, which he

gave as the Imperial Light Horse. This concluded his examination, and he was told to fall back into line.

"I don't believe we shall see him to-night, to speak to," said Bunny. "How confoundedly tantalising, isn't it?"

"Never mind, we shall get a chat with him to-morrow," replied Jack; "we must possess our souls in patience."

But if the sudden appearance of Hugh had been an agitating event to Bunny, something happened a moment later which was a hundred times more amazingly bewildering, exciting, and delightful. For as Bunny gazed towards the entrance gate, at which sat the registrar, a Boer entered suddenly. The next minute Bunny gripped Jack's arm with violence.

"Look at him, Jack—look at the Boer fellow who has just come in—speaking to the man at the table," he muttered. "*Am I raving mad, or is that my brother Geoff?*"

CHAPTER XIII

HOPE

"MAD? I should say you are—*raving* mad," replied Jack, trying to be cool and calm, but trembling with excitement almost as much as Bunny himself. "Which—where?"

"The young Boer just come in. It is Geoft. I'll take my oath to it, Jack! Do you think I wouldn't recognise old Geoff in *any* disguise?"

"I do believe you're right," said Jack Rosenthal. "Those two have some game on, old man; we must take care not to give it away—we mustn't know them"—

"No—we won't—we won't; but let's get nearer and see if we can learn anything of his game."

Poor Bunny could scarcely articulate his words, so great was his agitation. Jack saw this.

"Steady, old man," he said; "try not to look so excited."

Geoff meanwhile was deep in the midst of a conversation with one of the Boers on duty as warders. He spoke rather loudly and in an animated and excited manner, peering about the while as though to look for someone. He saw Bunny but made no sign, though his face seemed suddenly to flush and his breathing to pause for an instant. Bunny overheard his words now, having come closer in.

"He was a long-legged, tanned, hungry-looking rascal in a trooper's uniform. I spent money on him on the way up and fed him like a prince; he vowed to pay me double when we reached Pretoria—two shillings for every one I spent; but they took him from me at the first railway station and separated us. There he is, the hungry-looking devil! I must have my money out of him."

"Go and ask him for it, by all means," said the warder. "Why not? And if you get it you can stand me a drink."

"That I will—and another after it!" said Geoff, approaching his brother.

"Now then, you," he said, speaking English

with a strong Boer accent, "you'd better settle accounts with me. Thought you were going to get off, did you? It's three pounds you've got to give me, and here's the bill."

He handed Hugh a slip of paper, which Hugh glanced at and crumpled up. Then Hugh produced money and paid it over to his brother, gravely protesting that he had charged him fully three shillings for every one, instead of two.

Geoff said nothing more; he pocketed the money and returned to the warder.

"Come on," he said, "there's a pair of drinks for you in this."

Then he went out, bestowing a grin and a wink in Bunny's direction as he turned to close the gate behind him.

The newly-arrived prisoners were hustled away, after the ceremony of registering, to their sleeping-places, and Bunny saw nothing more of Hugh until next morning.

Neither he nor Jack slept much that night. Excitement murdered sleep. Neither dared they speak of the matter so close to their hearts, lest others should hear. It would not do that their hopes of escape should become

known even to their own fellow-prisoners—the great, burning secret must lie and smoulder within the brain of each.

But in the morning the brothers met when the prisoners strolled—a sad, broken-spirited crew, for the most part—about the grounds.

"Come aside and have a quiet chat," Hugh murmured, as Bunny joined a group of whom his brother formed one. "We barely know each other, mind."

Presently the two strolled away together.

"Tell me everything you can," said Bunny. "First, is mother all right?" And reassured on this point, he continued: "Now, explain—why are you a prisoner, and which cavalry corps do you belong to, and how on *earth* has dear old Geoff contrived to follow you so quickly and not get nabbed?"

Hugh explained everything, telling in brief the story of their enterprise as we know it.

"What! all to fetch me out of here?" said Bunny, with much feeling. "Well, you *are* a pair of bricks. I hope you'll believe how grateful I am!" he added, after a moment.

"Don't thank me, old chap," laughed Hugh; "for, to tell you the truth, I was rather against the scheme, and told Geoff I considered his plan quite a rotten one—at first; but I came round after a while, and agreed. Dear old Geoff is really a genius in the way of mimicry. Great Scot! he's a better Boer than they are themselves! He hasn't once been suspected."

"He was always a ripping actor, even at school. What's he going to do next—is there any plan, or do we wait upon opportunity?"

"I don't know much more than you. We were separated before we had our last talk, but of course we couldn't have settled, anyhow, until we had seen how the land lay here. It seems to me that this place would be easy enough to get out of, if that were all; but the thing is, they leave it pretty easy because they know very well that poor beggars in uniform can't escape out of the very middle of the enemy's country. It's *after* getting out of quad that the real impossibility begins. My idea is, that they would rather like fellows to try and get away, in order that they might

have some excuse for shooting instead of feeding them. They encouraged fellows to attempt to escape in the last war, you know, in order to shoot them down the moment they did. It's a favourite Boer trick, like the white-flag dodge."

"We shall have to be jolly careful!" Bunny sighed. Then he entertained Hugh with an account of his own capture. "Blithering idiot that I was!" he ended; "if I had managed as well as old Geoff I shouldn't be in this beastly hole, nor you either, old chap — nor would Geoff be in hourly danger of being spotted. You remember Jack Rosenthal, by the bye? Well, he's here too. I wish we could take him on when we escape,—if ever we do,—he's simply spoiling to get back to the front."

"We're going to take him on—it's part of the plan. Old Rosenthal wanted to put ten thousand pounds on his head—if we could bring it home unbroken; but we refused the offer. By the bye, did I show you Geoff's bill of last night? Don't be seen reading it, though I don't suppose any Boer would understand much of the drift of it."

Bunny took the paper and read. It was an original document, and ran as follows :—

The Bill of PIETER KUYPER for to feed the Mr. Englishman who come from Nicholson's Nek to Pretoria into the Lock House there—

At Harrismith.

Beefs and Beers and lofes . .	schillings	18
Many eggs everyday, but altogether	the same	12
The Boil-hen at Vrede . .	„	10
Milks and veggetubbles 3 days	„	15
To drink for Pieter Kuyper . .	„	15
	Pounds 3, schillings	10

The Englishman please to remember if there was more. Pieter Kuyper will come in three days before he return, but sooner perhaps. Mr. Englishman please to remember all he eat and drink. P. K. also tink mit de head. Maybe he remember sometink.

Bunny laughed quietly over this document.

"Of course he means us to gather that he is working away for ideas, and that we may see him in three days or sooner, and that we are to think too."

"Of course," Hugh assented. "The old rascal got three pound ten out of me for this,

though, and it's the last I shall see of *that* little sum."

"Never mind," laughed Bunny; "the bill is worth the money."

After a while, and when a good opportunity offered, Jack Rosenthal was taken into consultation, and the three conspirators paced about the grounds, which were fairly large. Some of the prisoners played football, and others a rough game of cricket, doing their best to forget the sorrows of captivity in thus faintly recalling the pastimes of happier days in the old country.

Bunny and the others strolled down to the end of the grounds. There was a plantation of young trees and bushes here, and Hugh made the remark that if it came to changing clothes, which it *must* come to before they could possibly dream of getting away,—he and Jack, at anyrate, who were in English uniforms,—this would be the place to do the change.

"Yes," said Jack, rather dismally. "When one comes to think of it, there's a deuced lot between us and freedom yet!"

"We haven't begun yet," said sanguine

Bunny; "we'll make things spin a bit once we start."

"I daresay, but how shall we ever start? How is Geoff going to help us? He can't get in when he likes; and if he did, I don't quite see how he's going to bring disguises with him."

"Dash it all, Jack, don't croak!" laughed Bunny. "We can't do anything for ourselves, of course; but old Geoff's outside, and we must trust to him."

"Only we mustn't expect *too* much of him," said Jack; "but there—I won't croak. Geoff's a jolly clever fellow, and I don't know anybody I'd sooner have working our business outside."

During the next couple of days the three prisoners found it very difficult to make a decent show of composure. They tried to join in the games that went on, and conversed with any who wished to talk.

There was only one subject in these conversations: the war, and the prospect, if any, of exchange.

No one spoke of escape; or if the subject were casually mentioned, it was only touched

upon as an unrealisable ideality, such as Utopia or the Millennium.

"What's the good of thinking of it?" said one man. "You might as well release one frog in a yard full of ducks and tell him to keep out of danger, as get out of here and start escaping in a khaki uniform in the middle of the Transvaal. Give us disguises, and one might attempt it."

"I'd attempt anything in reason," said another, "to get back to the fun down at Ladysmith; "but it's absurd to walk into a chalk-pit with your eyes wide open. It's the most unspeakable bad luck that ever wretched beggars suffered, but there's nothing to be done. Here we are, and here we're going to be till the war's over, or they exchange us."

CHAPTER XIV

VESTA TO THE RESCUE

MEANWHILE Geoff was not idle. Geoff was not the kind to allow the grass to grow under his feet; he was trying to work out a plan which he had conceived for the escape and retreat of the party of four Englishmen—a task of whose difficulty and magnitude he was quite conscious, though it did not deter him.

First of all he took the train to Johannesburg, in order to make a few inquiries. Geoff would scarcely have recognised the town. Half the shops and places of business — nay, three-quarters of them—were shut up, together with the dwelling-houses attached. Many of the windows giving upon the street were shuttered, and the upper windows boarded. The streets were nearly empty. It was as though the plague had swept through the town and carried off

nine out of every ten living people inhabiting it.

Geoff went straight to the house of the banker Van Krygkraft, whom he devoutly hoped to find away from home—at the war, for choice; for though he was quite an admirer of the rich banker, and hoped one day to make him his father-in-law, yet everything, Geoff said to himself, should be in its right place, and the right place for Vesta's father at this crisis was undoubtedly as far as possible from Johannesburg.

Geoff rang at the bell and asked for the young mistress. "The master is away at the war, is he not?" he added, in a nonchalant manner.

"Oh yes—been away a month and more," said the servant.

"Tell the young lady one has come from the front who desires to see her," said Geoff. "Tell her she need not fear—I do not bring bad news," he added. A moment later he received an invitation to walk upstairs.

Geoff entered the room and closed the door behind him. Vesta sat working alone by the table; she glanced up, but did not recognise him.

"Do you bring news of my father?" she asked.

"No, Vesta, I'm afraid I don't," said Geoff.

The girl dropped her work with a little cry. "Geoff!" she exclaimed. The next moment she was in his arms, half laughing, half crying.

"Geoff—how could you be so rash?" she sobbed. "I am—oh!—ever so glad to see you, but you have run a terrible risk—you must have—in coming here."

"I know it, Vesta; but you'll admit it could not be helped when you have heard what I have to say. I've come to ask you to help me, Vesta. Stop—are you alone in the house?"

"Alone with the old nurse Anna and one servant. Father was commandeered almost as soon as you had gone; he is outside Mafeking."

"Good. I am in a terrible fix, Vesta, and unless you'll help me, I don't know what I shall do. Shall I tell you the whole story?" Vesta nodded. "Well," he continued, "you must know I lost Bunny, quite at the beginning of the war. We were scouting, and he got caught and brought to Pretoria. Then Hugh, my eldest brother, and I vowed we would get

him back, and invented a plan. The result is that Hugh and Bunny are both prisoners now, and I've got to get them out. I am figuring as a Boer, as you may see by my clothes. Well now, will you help me?—that's the question. You needn't even see them, mind you."

"Oh Geoff! how can I—what can I do? And what would my father say?"

"Your father must never hear of it. It is not as though it were a matter of the first importance that Bunny and Hugh should remain prisoners in the hands of the Boers; I assure you they won't be missed; there are about two thousand other prisoners just as important as they. You won't refuse to help us, Vesta, I know."

"Oh no, I won't refuse; but what is there that I can do?"

"The bank's closed, isn't it?" said Geoff unexpectedly.

"Oh yes—all the clerks are commandeered; and the English ones have gone—excepting Mr. Bunsen," she added, with a queer smile; "he is here still."

"Bunsen here still!" repeated Geoff. "Is he ill?"

"Oh no; he goes about; he comes to see me every day; and I do so wish"—

"Yes," said Geoff—"wish what?"

"Only, that I wish he wouldn't," laughed Vesta. "It's very kind of him to have, as it were, constituted himself my guardian, but I do so wish he would go away and leave me."

"Perhaps if I see him I may persuade him!" said Geoff grimly. "So the bank is closed, and the windows all shut up, aren't they?—they looked so in the dusk. Well, I think I can get Bunny and the others out of jail at Pretoria, but the difficulty is, what to do with them when they're out. They can't be seen in Pretoria in English uniforms; that's clear."

"So you want to bring them here and put them into the bank—is that it? But won't they be just as much in prison there as at Pretoria itself?"

"It wouldn't be long—next day, or in a day or two, we should all move South. Come now, Vesta, is it yes or no? Don't agree if you'd rather not. I daresay I could get into some other shut-up house"—

"No, no; I will help. They are your brothers, Geoff, and all that I can do I shall do—if I am

a bad Boer I shall at least be a loyal friend. Now tell me, dear Geoff, how it is all to be done, and what you intend to do afterwards. I can see that you have been through many dangers already—how frightened I should have been if I had known! Sit down, now, and tell me all."

Geoff sat down and entered into a full explanation of how he intended to proceed. He felt gay and happy, and made Vesta laugh with his description of his adventures with Hugh.

The old nurse entered presently; but Geoff did not intend that she should recognise him, and launched out into a flowery narrative, from the Boer point of view, of the operations outside of Mafeking, whence he pretended he had come to bring news of Burgher van Krygkraft, who, to judge by Geoff's heroics, must be fairly running the Mafeking show "off his own bat," performing prodigies of valour and generalship.

Then Geoff rose to go, and Vesta herself let him out of the front door. Before leaving her he recapitulated details of the plan as arranged between them, in order to make quite sure that she fully understood.

"Not a word to Bunsen, of course!" he

warned her. "He is not to be trusted, Vesta; remember that!"

Vesta laughed, and declared that Guy was the last person she would dream of trusting. Then began the farewells, which were, no doubt, very like the farewells of other young people similarly situated, and therefore need not be described. But Geoff said very seriously before he finally left her, that he would never forget Vesta's kindness in this emergency.

When Geoff returned to Pretoria he went straight to the prison compound and offered himself to the chief warder there as an assistant.

"Why are you not at the front?" asked that official.

"Because I brought down a prisoner," said Geoff. "I was at the front outside Ladysmith until my head began to grow confused with the constant noise of the big guns. I had brain fever as a youngster, and have never been up to much since. I think a bit of a holiday away from the front may do me good. Afterwards I shall return and have another shy at the rednecks, if there are any left by that time to be shot."

"Can you talk any English?" asked the

Boer. "The fellows in there are a set of ignorant louts, who are of no use whatever to me. You must understand that a man who knows English well, and can pretend that he scarcely knows a word, may pick up from the prisoners occasional scraps of information which may turn out useful."

"Oh, I know English pretty well," said Geoff, "and I think I should be the very man for your purpose—try me!" And to Geoff's immeasurable delight the Boer then and there engaged him to go among the prisoners, ostensibly to keep order and attend to their needs, but actually to pick up any scraps of information upon military matters which might possibly prove useful.

Truly the cards of Destiny were shuffled happily for Geoff and his friends this day.

It is probable that seldom have three young men been so utterly amazed by any apparition short of a supernatural visitation, as were Jack and Bunny and Hugh when Geoff suddenly appeared at the prison quarters in the capacity of warder.

It was all so unexpected and so wonderful. The door of the grounds opened, and Geoff

just walked in, armed with a rifle and adorned with a kind of ticket in token of his office, and there was an end.

When their first surprise was over, our three prisoners could scarcely contain the delight which Geoff's newest feat occasioned them.

"For consummate cheek, for sublime impudence, for clever and audacious effrontery," said Jack, with a splendid rhetorical burst inspired by enthusiasm, "this takes the bun! You chaps may be proud of your brother."

"I think we are," said Hugh; and as for Bunny, his eyes were following Geoff's movements as he walked about, patrolling the grounds, with a kind of dimness in them which may have been admiration.

"He is, he really is, splendid!" said Bunny presently.

"How in the world has he done it—that's the puzzle!" Hugh murmured. "These Boers are pretty sly. I suppose the fact is, that when impudence and audacity mount to the very highest levels they aren't suspected as such. No one would imagine anybody could display such cheek as this, so they aren't on the lookout for it.

This was, apparently, the sense of the trio, for no one controverted the theory. As for Geoff, he paraded about, occasionally speaking a word to a prisoner here or another there, and once or twice entering into a short conversation with someone.

"There couldn't be any harm in our moving up near him," Bunny suggested; "I'm dying to talk to the old chap."

"Go up close and offer him your tobacco pouch," suggested Hugh.

Bunny did so, walking up as if to pass, then stopping to offer the pouch. Geoff took it and filled his pouch slowly.

"Dear old Bunny," he said, "here I am, you see, come for you. How have you been—quite well? I told you I'd come if you got nabbed."

"It's wonderful—wonderful!" was all Bunny could say for a minute or two; "I never should have believed you could have done it."

"The funny part is that it has all been so perfectly simple," said Geoff. "I hope the rest will go as easily; but, of course, the most difficult part is only just going to begin."

"Do you mean us to escape to-day? We're

ready whenever you like; you must tell us exactly what we each have to do"—

"Steady, old man!" laughed Geoff; "not so fast; there's a lot to arrange yet. I shall have to bring in a change of kit for every one of you."

"Yes, of course; we couldn't escape in our present clothes; at least I might, but certainly not the other two in their uniforms. We thought of that, and have looked about for a corner where we could change into new kit."

"Good—and is there any place?"

"Among the trees down there in the corner; one might do a good bit of changing in there, at dusk, and not be seen."

"Very well, that shall be the place, then. To-morrow or next day I shall bring in clothes and deposit them in a safe spot among the trees whenever I can do so unseen."

"How shall you bring them in?" asked Bunny.

"Wear them," said Geoff. "We musn't talk too long, or somebody may remark we're making friends too jolly fast. See you later, old man!" Geoff proceeded upon his travel about

the ground, and presently stopped to watch a small game of improvised football.

Here Hugh strolled by and took up the tale.

"You've managed jolly well to get taken on," he said; "how did you do it?"

"Simply applied and got it," said Geoff, grinning. "Very easy when you've a good character or good looks to recommend you. Lucky it wasn't you that had to apply for the post, eh, old man?"

"One can't assault a warder, so you're safe, and you know it!" retorted Hugh; "but wait till we get outside!"

"Yes, I will. Meanwhile I've made arrangements to get taken in at Johannesburg, where we can lie hid for a bit. Of course there's the getting there; but I think we can do that all right, at night-time."

"Who's going to take us in at Johannesburg?" asked Hugh, astonished. "Are there English there now?"

"There may be one or two, possibly; but we aren't going to them. Go and asked Bunny who *Vesta* is!" said Geoff, moving away with a grin on his face.

Hugh did so, and now learned for the first time that there was a possibility of a Boer sister-in-law for him.

"Great Scot!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to tell me Geoff's going to marry a Dutch woman?"

"Wait till you see her—she's a ripping girl!" said Bunny.

"Jove, she'd need to be! Why can't he fall in love with an English girl?"

"Don't be narrow, man; wait till you've seen her, I tell you. What does it matter whether she's English or Hindoo or anything else so long as she's—well, what Vesta is!" said Bunny. "You'll end by falling in love with her yourself, if you don't look out."

On the following morning, when Bunny strolled up to speak to the warder as he sat and smoked in a shady corner, Geoff started the conversation by asking if he looked fat.

"Why?" said Bunny, laughing; "do they feed you so jolly well? I wish they did *us*."

"Well, I've got two suits of clothes on," said Geoff. "When you go in to dinner I shall get rid of one, and right glad I shall be, for it's confoundedly hot."

Bunny looked anxiously at him after dinner, in order to see whether he was noticeably thinner, but concluded that probably he would not be suspected of having entered into a sudden decline.

Geoff had found a quiet corner among the bushes and had safely deposited the garments.

"I must forbid any fellows coming along this way," he mentally resolved; "I shall say it's against orders to go among the trees, where they aren't seen."

Bunny overheard several of his fellow-prisoners comment upon the new warder—the general conclusion being that he spoke the weirdest English, but he seemed a good chap.

As for Geoff, he gave a daily report to his superiors of all the information which he had contrived to pick up among the prisoners. Some of the communications he thus made were considered rather important by the prison-commandant, and were wired to the seat of war as secrets wormed from the captives by the wiles of those in charge of these unfortunates.

These secrets comprised a few facts not generally known on the British side, though

undoubtedly of great interest and significance; as, for instance, that the British reverses had driven several of the Generals crazy, while two others—after mutual accusations, resulting in a ferocious quarrel over the mess-table—had engaged in a duel and severely wounded one another. These items, together with others of similar sensational character, provided excellent reading for the Boer officers at the front, as well as doing credit to Geoff's inventive talent.

During the third day Geoff announced to Bunny that at dusk that night all three of them must slip out into the grounds and get into the clothes provided for them, carefully explaining the exact spot in which these were to be found.

CHAPTER XV

THE CRITICAL MOMENT

BUNNY and Jack contrived to sneak off and conceal themselves in the shady corner of the grounds before the time came when oncoming darkness gave the signal for prisoners to return within the sheds provided for their accommodation, and there they remained after the rest had gone in. Hugh elected to hang about near the door and slip out when no warder happened to be looking.

Hugh looked haggard and ill with excitement—so much so, that one of his companions remarked upon it.

"You look ill, mate; is anything wrong with you?" he asked.

"Nothing but the longing to get out of this beastly hole," he replied.

"That's a disease that time will cure, I

hope!" laughed the other; "meanwhile it isn't a bit of good moping."

"You're right," said Hugh; "it isn't; but I'm that kind, and can't help it."

Geoff came to Hugh's assistance presently. He had a newspaper in his hand.

"Where are the others?" he whispered as he passed.

"There"— said Hugh laconically. "I stayed in case you'd anything to say."

"No, nothing. Slip out when I get these two chaps absorbed in the paper—luckily there's a Boer victory. I'll join you there in a quarter of an hour or so. How d'you feel? Shaky?"

"Yes, just a bit. It'll pass off once I'm out."

Geoff now got hold of the two warders and secured their attention.

"There's good news in this," he said—"a telegram from Kimberley. Listen here."

In a moment the three heads were close together, and Geoff had his men absorbed. Hugh took the opportunity of slipping out unobserved, excepting by one or two fellow-captives, who remarked upon it one to another.

"I believe that chap has some game on,"

said he who had spoken to Hugh a moment before as to his pallor. "He looks so beastly pale. Shouldn't wonder if he means to make a bolt."

"How can he possibly, in uniform? Dash it! we all would if only we had civilian clothes."

"Well, he came here privately with that young Boer, the nice-looking one, three days ago. I happened to see him arrive. He paid the chap some money, and he seems pretty thick with him since. I've an idea that he may have squared the fellow."

"By Jove! if one really thought so, one might"— began the other, and stopped; the fact being, that he had suddenly conceived the idea of attempting to do as Hugh had done with this bribe-able person, but did not like to say so, lest his companion should be bitten by the same desire. "We can't *all* do it," he reflected.

Hugh crept cautiously down to the end of the grounds; but cautiously as he went, the two conspirators already there heard him coming, and stopped their very breathing lest he should be the wrong man, and they be discovered. The consequence was that at first

Hugh could not find them, and was obliged to give the family whistle—in a whisper—before they would make sign or sound.

"Is it you, Hugh?" said Bunny, scarcely more loudly than the softest whispering of a summer breeze among the flowers.

"Yes, all right," the answer came. "Geoff's coming in ten minutes. Where are the clothes?"

"Here—coat—trousers and slouch hat—and a flannel shirt. Put your things into this hole, and we'll cover the whole lot up with earth and twigs and things. Look sharp, old man!"

When Geoff arrived, a quarter of an hour later, all three were ready for him. Each was in his plain clothes, and the uniforms and Bunny's English garments were buried—as well as that office could be performed without the assistance of a spade.

"Now, follow me—about five yards apart," said Geoff; "and don't make more noise than a cat; and if you see me lie down or stop, stop or lie down too—like a shot."

Four hearts were beating high, though they felt sick with hope and anxiety, as the little procession started across the grounds.

Once Geoff suddenly lay down flat, when about half the distance had been traversed, and was instantly imitated by the rest. One of the Boer guards was walking across from shed to outer gate. They heard him open the door in the wall, shut it and lock it, and pass heavily down the street. He had not seen them.

Up got Geoff, the rest automatically following his lead, and this time the gate was safely reached. Geoff unlocked it and looked out. It was nearly dark and the road outside was empty. "Come on," he whispered.

In a moment all were out, and the door had been closed and locked behind them.

"All right so far!" said Geoff cheerily. "Follow me—all without a sound, mind."

Down the road the procession passed, quickly but very silently.

Geoff did not strike into the town, but right away from it, past a few straggling houses and cottages, a farm or two, fields, and presently the party found themselves on a wooded hillside.

"Now we may breathe," he said, stopping and speaking half aloud. "Thank Heaven we managed that nasty little bit all right!

Has that emergency flask of yours anything in it, Hugh?"

Hugh produced the flask; it was half full, and he passed it round. Each man took a sip. "Great Scot! how my heart has been thumping!" said Bunny; "did any of you fellows hear it?"

"You'd better pad your waistcoat, old man!" laughed Geoff; "for we haven't done with agitating moments yet. We can't have your heart giving us away, you know."

"It isn't so bad as Jack's boots"— said Bunny. "Jack, you're no scout—you made a terrible row walking down the road."

This was true. He had been the only one of the four whose progress was even audible.

"Yes, I noticed it," said Jack. "I must tie something under my boots."

"It doesn't matter now," said Geoff. "We've about done with cat-scouting: it's going to be more the brazen kind of work from now on."

"I'm dying to know the programme—do tell us, Geoff," said Bunny. "What have you arranged—anything? We're going to Johannesburg, I know; but how? We shall be

missed and pursued, I suppose. No chance of escaping that, is there?"

"That's what I can't tell you. I'm not going to Johannesburg with you. This is my plan. If you can improve on it, any of you, do, for I know it isn't perfect. I'm taking you to a spot near here, where most of the goods trains for Johannesburg and the front stop to shunt. You'll have to hang about and watch your opportunity to board one of the centre trucks while it's quite dark. If you succeed, travel as far towards Johannesburg as you can *while* it's dark, but you must be out of the train and in hiding somewhere near the line before daylight. It may take you one night, and it may take you two or three, to get there. There's a packet with slices of tinned meat in each man's pocket. You'll have to make it last, unless Bunny can sneak into a farm, as a Boer, and buy something; but better not if it can be avoided. When you get to Johannesburg, you've got to get to the Krygkraft Bank—you know it, Bunny—by night, of course. You'll find it all shuttered and boarded up, but here's the key that will let you in. You mustn't be seen entering or going out, of course. There'll

be food there, and all you want; but of course you mustn't allow any sign of life going on within to give you away. Wait there for me, as long as you can. Of course if anything happens to me, I shan't turn up, and you must go on as best you can without me. But—what's to-day? Thursday. Well, if I'm not there by Monday night, I'm never coming. Now, is all clear?"

"I should like to know why you're going back to the prison, old man—isn't it a bit risky?" said Hugh.

"It might be, but I don't think it will—I've thought it out. You see, if I go back I shan't be suspected of having had anything to do with the escape, if it is discovered. But there are such a deuce of a lot of prisoners that I'm hoping they may not notice that any have gone—at anyrate for some time, until the roll is called. If I see any suspicion in the other warder chaps I shall be the first to discover your escape, and shall do my best to persuade them that it would be best for us all to say nothing about it."

"It seems to me you're having more than your share of work and of the risk too!" said Hugh. "Don't do anything dangerous that can possibly be avoided."

"You bet!" laughed Geoff. "As for the risk, though, don't flatter yourselves you're not going to have as much of that as you'll care for—especially you two non-Dutch-speaking fellows. I haven't a notion yet how we're going to get on from Johannesburg: it'll take a lot of thinking, and you must all work your brains meanwhile to devise some plan. It's going to be a ticklish job for us all to get safely out of the country, and we must be prepared for a pretty lively time. Now, if you're all ready, we'll make a start for the shunting station. Let's trot; we shall get there quicker. It's nearly three miles out."

The shunting station was safely reached; and here a convenient hiding-place was found, and the party waited until a goods train from Pretoria came along. This was successfully boarded, the three fugitives climbing into a truck half full of sacks and boxes of stores for the front.

"If you're discovered, *you*'ll have to do the talking, Bunny, mind you. You are all Boers, of course, but these two are too fast asleep, or too drunk, to be conscious of what's going on. You might be taking them back to the front,

after a holiday, and missed the train because they were drunk."

Geoff was never at a loss for ingenious expedients, and this one was adopted because no one could think of a better.

"Farewell all, for a couple of days—I hope it won't be more," he added. "I shall wait about and see you off, and then go."

"Do take care of yourself, Geoff," said Bunny, wringing his hand. "I'm awfully afraid you're taking too much risk."

"On the contrary, I'm the most cautious fellow going," replied Geoff. "I am sometimes inclined to err from excess of caution. It's you that must look out for squalls."

Geoff waited for half an hour, when, after several bouts of shunting backwards and forwards, he was delighted to see the train get into full swing and pass right away and out of sight. Then he returned to his own quarters, and was at the prison early in the morning, as usual.

During the night, on thinking over the matter, he had decided that it would quiet his mind and add nothing to the dangers already incurred if he should take the bull by the

horns and be, apparently, the first to discover the escape. He would then be in a position to know immediately what, if any, steps were to be taken for the pursuit of the fugitives—in which case forewarned would be forearmed.

Therefore Geoff confided next morning to one of his fellow-warders that he had strong grounds for fearing that one at least, and he thought possibly two, of the prisoners intrusted to their care had, in fact, bolted.

"Almachtig!" exclaimed the other, "what makes you think so?"

"Well, I can't find the fellow I brought in—my own prisoner," said Geoff; "that long fellow with a yellow moustache. Thank Heaven he paid me the money he owed me before going! It may be a serious matter for us—if we say anything about it, that is!"

"Ah! if we do. But *must* we? There are so many, that perhaps they won't be missed."

"The real danger would be if they were caught and brought back. Then the Commandant would want to know how they got out."

"Whereas if they were not missed and not followed they might get safely away. I

see. Really, Piet, I think if we are wise men we shall let the rascals go. If they do come back, later, we needn't say they have been in before."

"Good; let them go. It was a clever idea of yours, Conrad. Shall we say anything of this to Yunker?"

"No, he won't observe anything—a fathead like him! Let him be."

So it was agreed to say nothing of the escape.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE DANGERS

MEANWHILE the little party of fugitives covered the greater part of the journey between Pretoria and Johannesburg in safety; but at a small wayside station, where the train stopped for some shunting, they had a scare.

A man with a lantern passed down along the trucks, peering into each to see that all was right with the cargo. When he came abreast of the open truck in which our friends lay crouched among the sacks and chests, he flashed his lantern over the contents and saw them. "Heavens blue!" he ejaculated. "What's this—who are you?"

"Don't give us away, friend," said Bunny. "We're trying to get back to the front after a short rest that we were allowed, but we've had a bit of bad luck. The fact is, we missed

our train and were obliged to come on as we could; these fellows, my companions, both having been so drunk that I couldn't get them to the station in time."

"They look as though they hadn't recovered yet!" said the fellow.

"They haven't. Wake them if you can; I can't."

"Come—wake up, you!" said the man, shaking Jack by the shoulder. Jack snored and muttered something, but did not open his eyes.

"I tell you, it's no use," said Bunny; "you'd better just let us go quietly on."

"I can't do that without leave. I should catch it from my superior."

"Well, go and ask him, like a good chap. See here, I haven't much left in the way of cash after my little holiday, but I'm good for a drink or two."

"No, no; keep your money. If I can get you leave, I will. Stop—you're not fugitives, are you? The other day a fellow escaped in a goods train, just as you are trying to do now. Let's have a look at you!" He flashed his lantern in Bunny's face. Bunny had a beard of over a fortnight's growth; his hair was long

and unkempt; he did not look like a smart Englishman, neither did the other two; besides, his Dutch was good.

"Fugitives!" laughed Bunny. "What a queer notion! Do we look like it?"

"Looks don't go for much. I don't know that you do, and you're probably all right, as you say; but I think I'll fetch the station-master and hear what he has to say on the matter."

Away trotted the guard, or porter, or whoever he may have been.

"Come, boys," said Hugh, "I think it's time to get out of this train and wait for another."

All three were out in the twinkling of an eye, and away down an enbankment into the fields that lay by the side of the railway. Here, behind a hedge, they crouched and hid themselves, not dreaming that they would be followed or discovered.

But the man with the lantern must have received stringent orders from his superior with regard to the stowaways; for he hurried back to the truck to find and, doubtless, to turn them out, or bring them forthwith before the stationmaster to answer for their conduct.

When he found the truck empty he felt anxious as to the fugitives. What if they really were Outlanders? The idea was absurd —they could not possibly be so.

Nevertheless he ran down the embankment, hoping to find his men, and perhaps capture one or two. At the bottom he waved his lantern to and fro until he found their track; then he followed it.

"Confound the rascal—he's following us by scent, like a hound!" exclaimed Hugh, under his breath. "If he comes within reach I'm going to jump on him. Have a handkerchief ready, someone, to gag him—he mustn't shout!"

The fellow came panting along, holding his lantern low, and guided by the marks of feet upon the damp, soft soil of the field. In a moment he was upon them.

Then out sprang Hugh from his ambush, landing full upon him and bearing him to the ground on the back of his head. The fellow had no time to shout. Bunny was upon him in an instant with a handkerchief, which he wound tightly over his mouth, gagwise, as well as over his eyes.

"Now take the other side of the hedge,

where the ground's drier!" whispered Hugh. "Come on!"

Away ran the three, leaving their man gagged upon the ground, and with his wrists tied behind his back.

"I hope they'll find him before he starves, poor chap," said Bunny. "Perhaps he was coming to tell us we might go on; in which case it was frightfully hard lines for him."

Bunny need not have fretted, for within a very few minutes the gentleman concerned had recovered the use of his voice, it appeared, if not of his hands, and was shouting back to the station for assistance at the very loudest pitch of that organ.

"Run, boys, for all you're worth!" said Hugh. "We're on grass now—he won't track us here!"

"Bear round towards the station again," suggested Bunny. "Why not board the same train? It would be the last thing they'd expect us to do."

There were shouts behind now, in more than one voice. The porter had been reinforced.

"Wait a second and see which way they go to look for us!" said Hugh.

The voices seemed to be tending straight across country, and the light of the rekindled lantern—for it had been extinguished when its bearer fell—flickered and waved in the same direction.

"Yes; back to the station—round here!" cried Hugh. And within five minutes the party had reached the abandoned platform and, having first chosen the truck most convenient for hiding purposes, had crept under a tarpaulin, snug and safe.

A quarter of an hour later the stationmaster returned, followed by the porter, who—to judge by the language of the former—was in disgrace. The stationmaster did not believe the porter's story, and abused him roundly for keeping the train on account of some silly nightmare. "Too many sausages for your supper," he said. "Come, finish your coupling quickly and let's get on."

"Destiny has been very hard on that porter to-night," said Jack, when the train was once more moving. "He deserved better luck."

When next the train stopped, which was at the junction, but a little way out of Johannesburg, the fugitives slipped out of their truck on

the far side. It was still quite dark, and they had no difficulty in getting safely away from the station. Bunny recognised the place and, knowing the country well, was able to guide the party to a quiet spot at the foot of a kopje, where a small stream ran amid rocks and boulders. Here, in the dawning light, all three men bathed, and made their breakfast of tinned meat and sweet water; and when they had finished their repast, two slept while the third watched, taking turns in this way throughout the greater part of the day. It was five miles from the city; and when darkness set in again they started on foot, and soon reached their destination.

Johannesburg, especially at night, was at this time like a city of the dead. The whole of the Outlander and the greater part of the Boer population were absent. Houses and streets were deserted, buildings shuttered and boarded. It was as though some epidemic had suddenly appeared in its midst, and all the population had fled in terror.

Bunny knew every inch of the city, and had no difficulty in guiding the party; so that by a very early hour in the morning they safely

reached the large building which in happier days had been used as the headquarters of Van Krygkraft's Bank, one of the most prosperous in the town.

Here they found food prepared for them, and wine and blankets. There were even books to read. On the table lay a paper with these words, "Please, no lights, no noise, no smoking."

"Who did all this for us?" asked Hugh. "Upon my word, it's jolly well managed. Of course Geoff inspired it, but who did it? That Boer girl of his?"

Bunny declared that he imagined this to be extremely likely.

"Upon my word, I feel inclined to forgive her all," said Hugh, "for this—it's so awfully well done."

"All what?" asked Bunny mildly.

"Well, being a Boer, and getting engaged to Geoff, and so on."

Jack guffawed so loudly at this that Bunny took a pencil and solemnly added the words "no laughing" to those already written on Vesta's paper.

The following night—after the three late

prisoners had spent twenty-four hours in the house in a condition not falling far short of luxury—Geoff appeared. He was in the very best of spirits, and brought a good report. He had arranged with his fellow-warders that nothing need be said about the escape. They had not observed that anything was wrong, Geoff said, until he pointed out that one or two captives were missing. There would be no pursuit, because no one else had any suspicion of the escape.

"Won't it look fishy *you* being away?" asked Jack pertinently.

"I explained that I was off for a couple of days to Potchefstroom to see my best girl," Geoff laughed.

"For Potchefstroom read Johannesburg and the tale was pretty true, you sly old rascal!" said Hugh. "Well, your best girl has done us well here, and I'm thinking of giving you my blessing with her, after all."

"Has anybody thought of a plan for getting away to Natal?" asked Geoff presently. "It's time we fixed on something—we can't stay here till the end of the war."

Everybody had thought of several plans;

there was no lack of the most ingenious schemes. The trouble was, that each one of them lacked the very elements of practical possibility.

Jack's, however, was voted the most possible. It was that the party should travel by night only, and should avoid every railway, every town, every village even. Mafeking might be their destination — being, perhaps, the nearest point at which the British lines might be entered.

"But who are we—if asked—and where are we going—and why can't two of us speak Dutch?" asked Geoff pertinently.

"We must try and think of some plausible answer to meet all these questions, which we are *sure* to be asked," he added presently, when no one seemed to have a solution ready to the problem put to them. "We must all go on thinking."

When evening began to fall cool and dark, Geoff left the house.

"There are a lot of things to arrange outside, and as I'm the Boer of the party I'd better see to them," he explained. "I shall be back in about an hour."

Bunny winked at Hugh when he had disappeared.

"Gone to see Vesta," he said. Hugh nodded sagely.

"No hurry about getting out of Johannesburg, eh?" he said, "so far as *he's* concerned."

But Bunny would never allow a breath of even unintentional condemnation of Geoff to be uttered unchallenged.

"Don't fash about Geoff," he said. "When he thinks the proper moment has come to be off, off he'll go, Vesta or no Vesta."

Geoff went straight away to the Krygkraft mansion, as was most natural and proper. He went to thank Vesta once again for the kind and complete arrangements she had made for the comfort of his party. Vesta had done all this herself, carrying everything with her own hands, and by night.

The two lovers spent a happy hour together. Vesta told Geoff, half jesting, that Guy Bunsen laid constant siege to her heart; nothing would keep him away from the house, and nothing discouraged him.

"Why is he here?" said Geoff angrily.

"Has he any right to remain in the place? He is no longer ill, I suppose—if he ever was!"

"If only Mr. Kruger would kindly turn him out," Vesta laughed, "how happy I should be!"

"I should go and smash him," said Geoff; "but he must not know I'm here, for—as you know—he hates me, and he's quite capable of venting his spite upon me in some dastardly way, such as"—

Geoff was interrupted in his sentence by a little cry from Vesta. He looked up surprised, and his eyes suddenly grew cold and stern, for there—half-way between the door and Vesta—stood Bunsen himself.

"How long have you been there you—you sneaking hound?" said Geoff furiously, barely restraining himself from falling upon the eavesdropper.

"Long enough to hear. What you say is quite true, Bigby. I *do* hate you, and I *am* capable of getting you into trouble, my friend; in fact, I have every intention of doing so."

. . . . . .

The little party of three at the Bank House

began to grow nervous as the night went on and Geoff did not return.

Eleven o'clock, twelve—one o'clock came, and still he was absent.

"Can he have got nabbed?" said Bunny, his teeth all a-chatter with agitation. "I think I'll go out; I can scout around and see if I can find out anything."

CHAPTER XVII

BUNSEN AGAIN

BUNNY went straight to the Krygkraft's house, which — the hour being past one in the morning — he naturally found shrouded, like its neighbours, in darkness.

"Geoff can't possibly be here," Bunny reflected, "and I don't like to rouse them up at this hour of the night; yet they may know what has become of him, for he is sure to have been in earlier in the evening."

Bunny stood in the porch and reflected and considered again, and had almost made up his mind that he couldn't decently knock up the household, when the thought came that perhaps Geoff's safety might depend upon his own prompt action at this crisis; and this decided him. He rang the bell.

It was the old nurse who came—after a long interval. Bunny was, at first sight, glad

it was she; for of course she would recognise him and know at once that all was right and that he might be admitted, and Vesta called up to see him.

Then he remembered that he was no longer the Bunny Bigby the old woman knew, but disguised as a young Boer, and, moreover, that he could not afford to make himself known to her.

The nurse peeped through the gap of the partly-opened door, keeping the chain fastened.

"What is it?" she said; "and why do you come at this time of night?"

Bunny disguised his voice and asked to see "the young lady."

"What for—and won't the morning do? Is it more news from the master?"

"Yes; important news from her father," said Bunny, grateful for the suggestion.

"Stay where you are then and I'll fetch her, though I think you might have waited till the morning," grumbled the old woman; and knocking forthwith at Vesta's door, she informed her young mistress that there was "another messenger from the war—one that couldn't wait till morning, but must needs

rouse respectable Christians from their beds to give his message at this unholy time of night."

"Maybe father told him he must come straight to us whenever he arrived," said Vesta, hurriedly dressing. "Go to bed, nurse, and don't be angry; it isn't the man's fault." The old woman departed, still grumbling.

Vesta imagined that this must be Geoff, who had returned with information of some important development. She knew he would not come at this hour unless the matter were absolutely imperative; therefore she hastened into the hall as quickly as she could get ready.

"Don't be frightened, Vesta; it's I," said Bunny. "I'm awfully sorry to knock you up at this hour; but has Geoff been here?"

"Come inside, Bunny," said Vesta faintly. She let Bunny in and sat down upon a hall chair, looking very white.

Bunny's heart sank into his shoes.

"Is anything the matter, Vesta?" he said. "Are you faint? Has anything gone wrong with Geoff?"

"I can't tell — I can't tell — oh, it's that

horrid, horrid Mr. Bunsen! Yes, he has been in, and he went away with Mr. Bunsen. They were not on good terms, and I am afraid that"—

"Stop, Vesta. How long ago was this?"

"Oh, they left at half-past nine, I think—about that."

"And now it's two in the morning, and Geoff hasn't turned up at the bank, Vesta. Where does the fellow live? Tell me quickly—Bunsen, I mean. At his old quarters?"

"Yes, at his old quarters. Do go quickly and see after him, dear Bunny. That man is not to be trusted."

"I know—I shall go at once. Good-bye, Vesta. You shall hear if it's all right, or in any case."

Bunny hastened away. The bank house lay between the Krygkraft's and Bunsen's lodgings, and he let himself in there in order to inquire whether Geoff had been home; but the two anxious men waiting there had no good news for him.

"Then I must go and find him," said Bunny, hastening away again. "Sit tight here till you hear from us—you've food enough for two days.

If we're longer than that, I'll find means to let Vesta know you want more."

. . . . . .

When Geoff heard Guy Bunsen utter the somewhat villainous speech with which he greeted his old school enemy and present rival, he firmly bade himself keep cool. "Remember, it's those who keep their heads that get out of difficulties," he told himself. When he had mastered the rage that boiled up within him at sight of the fellow, intensified when Bunsen uttered the threats as recorded in the last chapter, Geoff spoke again.

"Very well, my friend; then we are agreed upon that matter at anyrate. It is understood that you are going to get me into trouble—if you can! It is just as well I should know it. Thanks for telling me."

"Yes, you're glad to know it, no doubt. You may remember that we have old scores to settle? I do, at anyrate. Well, as it happens, I think I see my way to paying them off now, once for all. What a fool you were to come to Johannesburg!"

"Ah, well, I had to, you see, in order to make sure that Vesta here was all right. One

doesn't like to think that she is in the same town with such a confounded rascal as yourself, you know; for even though you may be powerless to hurt her, you can be a constant worry and nuisance, and I find that you have been both. Well, well, all that will soon end now."

"Oh, indeed; so I have been a constant worry, have I, Vesta? I shall remember that. I wonder how your father will like to know that you have received visits from a spy of the enemy."

"My father would be glad to learn that Geoff came to take care of me, especially if he had heard you talk to-night, Mr. Bunsen. Geoff is perfectly correct in saying that your visits will now end, for the servants shall be told not to admit you in future."

Bunsen grew livid with rage; he ground his teeth and swore audibly.

"Be quiet, you cad!" said Geoff angrily. "Keep that language for your gutter friends, and remember you are in the presence of a lady."

"If I am not to come here, at anyrate I shall see he doesn't come again," said Bunsen.

"You know what's done with spies, don't you, Vesta, when they're caught?"

"You daren't inform, you coward," said Vesta bravely. "You are living here on sufferance yourself, and you know it. If the authorities knew that you were at large, and not ill in bed, as you pretend, you would have been sent out of the country long ago."

"It's a lie," began Bunsen; but Geoff stamped his foot, and shouted "stop" so fiercely that he paused.

"Sit down there and listen to what I have got to say," continued Geoff; and he said it in a manner which apparently convinced the other that he intended to be obeyed, for Bunsen sat down, looking ill at ease.

"In the first place — don't be in the least alarmed, dear Vesta, for it will not come to violence with this coward—in the first place, see here,"—Geoff produced from his pocket and laid on the little table at his elbow a small revolver.

"I always carry this," he continued, "and it is as well that Mr. Bunsen should know it, even though we shall not enjoy his society very long. In the second place, you spoke the simple truth,

Vesta, when you said just now that he is living here on sufferance. He is. He has been allowed to stay in the town because, being afraid to carry a weapon on behalf of his country, he preferred to keep away from the front, and shammed ill in order to obtain permission to be here. Well, he has now seen the error of his ways, and is going to give notice to the authorities that his precious health is restored to him."

"Oh dear no, he isn't!" said Bunsen, nervously pretending to laugh. "He hasn't the remotest intention of doing anything of the sort."

"Ah, well, perhaps you may alter your mind when we have had a short conversation on the subject. Vesta," continued Geoff, now perfectly cool, "I think this would be a good opportunity for you to retire to bed; our long talk—it may be long, that must depend upon our friend here—will only weary you. Go to bed, my dear, and we shall let ourselves out presently."

Vesta looked anxiously in Geoff's face. She approached him and whispered, "Geoff, I am so frightened. Promise me you will do nothing

rash with him. If he were desperate he might"—

Geoff interrupted her, smiling reassuringly.

"I won't be rash," he said; "but I must take the bull by the horns. Things cannot be left as they are. Vesta is afraid we shall quarrel, Bunsen, and is kind enough to intercede for you. Bid her good-night, and thank her for her goodness; which is quite undeserved, tell her."

Bunsen turned his back, muttering something which did not reach the others. Geoff pocketed his revolver and led Vesta to the door. Here he bade her good-night. "Don't be alarmed," he whispered again. "I have the fellow's measure to an inch; it will be all right, and you shall hear what passes. I will write you and post the note in the town—they won't interfere with local letters."

"Promise—*promise* you'll be careful, dear Geoff," said Vesta, with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, I do promise. I may see you again, and I may not: it will depend upon circumstances. Now, good-bye, dear, dearest Vesta."

Geoff turned the key in the lock before he rejoined Bunsen at the other end of the room.

"Now, Bunsen," he said, "sit down and talk this matter over, as man and man. The presence of ladies is a bit awkward at times; but now we can speak our minds. You've got to get out of this, my friend. I don't care where you go to, nor whether you take a hand in the war or not; but you've got to leave Johannesburg, and at once."

"I'll see you"— began Bunsen, but Geoff interrupted. "No," he said, "you needn't swear: it won't help you or hurt me. I say again, you've got to go; you are not to be trusted in this town with Vesta. Now, will you come with me — I'll see that no harm happens to you—or will you be sent over the border by the authorities? Come, now, choose."

"I choose to stay where I am, thank you. I'm pretty comfortable here, and intend to remain. Who the deuce are you to order me about?"

"Come, I am giving you the choice of two alternatives," said Geoff, ignoring Bunsen's speech. "If you're wise you'll choose which of the two you prefer; else I shall have to decide for you."

"I tell you I shall stay; and I tell you something else too, and that is that unless you clear out of this place by daylight you'll come to a bad end. You seem to think you've the whip-hand over me, but you're wrong. It's I that can smash you, not you me! I know you're armed and I'm not, but you aren't going to shoot me; you know that well enough—you daren't; and now I'm off home. Open that door, or I'll make a row that'll fetch up the night police."

"Oh, I'll open the door with pleasure," said Geoff, to Bunsen's surprise. "I only locked it in order to make sure that you should hear what I had to say before giving me the slip. Go out by all means; we can continue our talk in the street."

Geoff let his companion out of the room. Together they went silently downstairs and out of the front door. Then Bunsen walked quickly down the street homewards. Geoff kept pace with him.

"Look here," said Bunsen, turning angrily upon him, "I didn't ask for your company and I don't want it; you'd better clear out and go your own way."

"My good man," said Geoff bracingly, "I am doing so: your way and mine are one and the same."

"Well, I can't prevent your going home; but if you've any sense you'd better not show me where you live; for if you do, I shall send the police to look you up first thing in the morning."

"Well, then, I'll make it easy for you. I'm coming to your rooms. You didn't expect to be so honoured, did you?"

"You'd better wait till you're asked," said Bunsen surlily. If it had been light enough Geoff would have seen that his companion had grown two shades paler. He had not realised Geoff's intention, and the prospect before him did not please him.

"No. I think I'll come anyhow," said Geoff. "Down here to the left, isn't it? Ah, I thought so. I've a good memory, haven't I?"

CHAPTER XVIII

SCOTCHING A SNAKE

WHEN the door of Bunsen's lodgings were reached, Bunsen opened it with his latchkey, passed quickly into the passage, and attempted to bang it behind him. But Geoff was ready for this manœuvre and put his foot forward. Bunsen sprang back to force the door shut, but again Geoff was too quick for him and got his shoulder in. Then, with a curse, Bunsen realised that the game of violence was up, and he ran upstairs—followed by his uninvited guest.

"There—now we're all safe and comfortable and may make, I suppose, as much noise as we like," said Geoff. "It would have been awkward to come to blows in a lady's house, and we might have spoiled some of old Krygkraft's furniture. Now we can do as we like, and if anything gets broken, why, after

all, it'll be your fault, and I suppose the chairs are yours too."

"What do you want of me?" said Bunsen sullenly; he was somewhat cowed by Geoff's persistence in following him home, and his present attitude. "You'd better be straightforward for once in your life, and tell me what you mean by all this violence and unmannerly behaviour."

"I simply mean that I am determined you shall leave Johannesburg at once. I have told you that you can, if you like, go south with me; I shall be off to-morrow or next day. But if you prefer to travel alone, that can be arranged. I shall see that you do one of the two. Which shall it be?"

"Why should I do either? By what right do you attempt to bully me like this?"

"Well, in the first place I think I am the stronger; but of course that is easily tested, if you like. My reason for wishing you away is that I do not trust you. You have threatened me, though that does not matter in the least; what does matter is that you also threatened one who is dearer to me than life itself, and who possesses certain claims upon me for pro-

tection, over and above those which I should consider any woman entitled to were she menaced by dangers which I thought I might forestall. There, that is my case in a nut-shell."

"Very well; I don't recognise your right to order me about, and I'll see you hanged before I budge from this place."

"The awkward part of your obstinacy would be that neither of us is going to move out of this room until you have agreed to one of the two alternatives I have put before you, and we have made arrangements for your departure. Even then you might have to put up with my society until you were ready to accompany me to my own quarters."

Bunsen considered for a short while. He was furious with rage, but he realised that violence would not help him against Geoff, of whose prowess he retained unpleasant memories dating from old schooldays. At last he spoke, "Well, supposing I promised to leave the town — would that satisfy you?"

"Theoretically yes; I should be glad to hear it. But I'm afraid I should require certain

pledges from you. I don't trust you, Bunsen; it's no use mincing matters."

"What kind of pledges?"

"Well, if you choose to accompany me, I should wait while you collected a few traps for the journey; then we should leave the house together."

"Thanks; in any case I should not accompany you; I prefer my own society, and should travel alone when I went. I am prepared, if you like, to promise that I will apply for a passport, and leave the town as soon as convenient to me after receiving my papers."

Geoff shook his head.

"No, Bunsen," he said; "that would never do. Why, my good man, the first thing you would do to-morrow morning—supposing I were to take your word and leave you here now—would be to put the police upon my track. That might have awkward consequences for me, though I am the most innocent of mortal men, because I have private reasons for keeping my presence in Johannesburg a secret."

"Well, what *do* you want of me—you don't seem to know your own mind! First you say

one thing and then another. You'll make me angry in a minute, Bigby, and then I shall turn obstinate and refuse to do or promise anything."

"Oh, but I can tell you in two words what I mean you to do. You're to take pen and paper and write that application for a passport at once; then you're to address the letter to the police department; and lastly, you and I'll step out and post it."

"You must be more than an ordinary fool to think I'd do anything of the sort," said Bunsen, with suppressed fury. "If you don't choose to accept my word, I retract my promise. I shall take my own course. You have defeated your own ends by being an unreasonable fool and attempting to bully me. I tell you I won't be driven."

Geoff sighed resignedly.

"Then I'm sorry to inflict my company upon you," he said; "but I'm afraid it must be an all-night sitting. I shall not leave you, day or night, until that letter is written and posted. It's somewhat chilly—with your permission I'll light the fire, which is laid, I see. Have you supped?"

Bunsen did not condescend to reply. He sat gazing in front of him, the picture of a furious, sullen man. Geoff lighted the fire and sat looking into it with an eye ready to note the slightest movement of his companion. Thus the pair sat for an hour or two, neither uttering a word.

Suddenly Geoff broke the silence.

"After all," he said, "it doesn't matter much who writes the letter. I could write it myself and sign it in your name. The main object is to draw the attention of the police (or of whomsoever it may concern) to the fact that you are still here, though fit to travel and ready to go South."

"I don't doubt that you are capable of forgery or any other villainy," snarled Bunsen.

"Thanks—in so good a cause it might be justifiable. I shall allow you another half-hour to think over the matter. At the expiration of that time I shall write the letter myself; but you shall come with me to post it, Bunsen, in any case."

Bunsen sat still and answered nothing.

At the end of a quarter of an hour he suddenly rose.

"Well, I'll write the letter," he said; "I'm sick of your presence here; I want to go to bed."

"So you shall when the letter is written and posted."

Bunsen sat and began to write. A moment or two later, Geoff, hearing steps outside, in the road, rose from his chair in order to patrol the carpet in front of the windows; he was afraid lest Bunsen should make a rush for one of them in order to call for help.

This movement on Geoff's part infuriated Bunsen, or maybe he became suddenly bold in the prospect of assistance, having, like Geoff, heard the sound of footsteps; for he suddenly seized a heavy brass candlestick that stood at his elbow and hurled it at Geoff's head as he passed close behind the table at which he sat and wrote.

The candlestick struck Geoff at the back of the neck, and he stumbled forward with the sudden impact and fell. In a moment Bunsen was upon him and feeling in his pocket for the revolver.

"Help!" he shouted at the same moment; "I am attacked by a madman!"

Geoff was half-stunned with the blow, and for a moment he was scarcely able to offer resistance. Bunsen knelt upon the small of his back and pressed his face down into the carpet, half suffocating him, while with his right hand he felt for the pistol. Luckily Geoff lay upon it, and he could not get at the weapon.

Meanwhile the steps had stopped at the house door, which was then opened and closed again; someone ran quickly up the stairs and burst into the room.

The newcomer took in the situation at a glance. He uttered a hoarse cry of fury, or astonishment, or perhaps of a variety of mixed emotions, and threw himself upon the struggling mass of humanity.

In a moment Bunsen, to his disgust, found himself overpowered and pulled backwards, none too gently.

"Get up, Geoff, get up! Good Heavens! you're not hurt, are you?" Bunny bent over his brother in a frenzy of alarm. "Am I too late, old man? Look here, you scoundrel, Bunsen, if you've injured him I swear I won't rest until"—

Geoff sighed and sat up.

"Dear old Bunny!" he said, smiling. "No, he hit me from behind when I wasn't expecting it. I don't think it's much. What a happy chance that you should have come just in time to help me!"

Bunsen had slunk away, and now sat staring into the fire.

"Thank Heaven you're not murdered," said Bunny. "I thought I was too late; he's capable of anything. I heard from Vesta he was with you, and hurried up. Here's what he threw at you. It weighs about a ton! No wonder it brought you down."

"I was an idiot to turn my back upon him. Jove! my neck's stiff. Sit down, Bunsen, and finish that letter, my friend. You nearly got the better of me that time, but the Fates, you see, are against you."

"I should have wrung your beastly neck in another minute," growled Bunsen. "You were always cowards, you Bigbys, and inclined to go two against one."

"That's a lie, and you know it. Stand up this minute, and I'll take you on with one hand!" said Bunny.

"I shouldn't trust the other fellow behind me," said Bunsen. "If I were getting the best of it he'd come in with you. A pair of beastly cowards, I call you!"

Bunny strode furiously towards Bunsen and stood before him.

"Look here, Bunsen, preserve a civil tongue in your head, my friend, or I shall not keep my hands off you. I haven't so good a temper as Geoff, remember, and I should love to smash your head, of all things. Come now, sit down and write the letter, whatever it may be, as Geoff bids you—and be sharp about it."

Bunsen rose sulkily and moved towards the table.

"I wouldn't have done it for one of you," he began; but Bunny unceremoniously pushed him forward, and he flopped into the writing-chair with a curse.

"Write as I dictate," said Geoff; "that will save trouble."

Then Geoff dictated a letter to the Controller of the Police Department, Johannesburg, setting forth that the writer, Mr. Guy Bunsen, clerk, and Englishman, having recovered from the indisposition which unfortunately prevented

his departure from the city at the outbreak of the war, was now ready to leave as soon as the Controller should forward his passport to the nearest English station.

When it came to signing the letter Bunsen made a last demonstration of resistance and absolutely refused to sign it.

"Very well," said Geoff resignedly; "you can have half an hour. When that is past, I shall myself write and post an unsigned letter to the Controller, and shall mention that the writer has good reason to believe that Mr. Bunsen is acting as an English spy in Johannesburg"—

"You fool," cried Bunsen, "as if I couldn't prove that *you*—disguised as a Boer and in hiding here—are the spy and not I!"

"Certainly, if you could produce me," said Geoff; "but I shall take good care that you are unable to do that; and they won't take it on trust, you know."

"Well, give me the confounded thing," said Bunsen, "and I'll sign it; but if I don't pay you out for all this one day, both of you, then may you die in your beds, and you won't do that if there's a hangman about!"

"Thanks," said Geoff, taking the signed letter and placing it in the envelope which he had already stamped and addressed; "I'll just step out and post it. Keep an eye on the gentleman, Bunny, and don't turn your back upon him. I think a breath of air may do me good after that fall."

CHAPTER XIX

FREE

A FEW minutes after Geoff's departure, Bunsen worked himself up into a condition of insane fury. Whether he fancied that Bunny would prove a less redoubtable antagonist than Geoff, or whether he decided that by taking the Bigbys by surprise, and one at a time, he would enjoy a better chance of overcoming both, and thus gratify the feeling of revenge which at this moment ached like the pangs of starvation within him, or whatever his exact motives may have been, it is certain that he suddenly lost control over himself, and unexpectedly and most furiously threw himself upon Bunny as he sat in the lounge-chair before the fire.

The onslaught was so unexpected and so spirited that both chair and Bunny rolled upon the floor together, and almost before Bunny

realised that he was attacked, Guy's fingers were about his throat, and a pressure was being put upon his windpipe which was unbearable.

But Bunsen had—to use an Americanism—bitten off more than he could chew.

Bunny was as lithe and active as a young leopard; he had not, moreover, the least intention of being garotted; and the sense of suffocation roused him to so desperate and irresistible an output of energy that Bunsen literally had no chance against him. Bunny laid hold of his wrists, forced his hands away, twisted him round, and was—in his turn—on top of his antagonist, and all in the space of three or four seconds.

"You villain," he gasped, somewhat out of breath with the short but sharp attack of strangulation to which he had been subjected; "you meant that for murder. It would serve you right if I gave you a touch of the same treatment."

"No, don't; I was furious and didn't know what I was doing. You can't blame a fellow for getting angry when he's set on and mobbed by two."

"Well, I won't murder you, as you would

have done by me if I had let you; but you are not to be trusted: biting dogs must be chained up and muzzled, and so must you. Take off that leather belt."

Once again Bunsen's self-control took wings.

"I won't; I swear I won't," he shrieked. "If you lay a finger upon me I'll shout till the whole street is roused. I'll get you shot, yet, for spying, you sneaking coward, that daren't appear by daylight when honest folks are about! I'll"—

What further threats Bunsen was about to fulminate must ever remain unknown, for at this instant Bunny deftly whipped out his handkerchief and, kneeling on the other's chest, contrived to pass it over his mouth and—in spite of kicks and struggles—to tie it behind his head. This was but a temporary measure—a demonstration, to mask the real attack.

Then, while Bunsen's hands were busy tearing at the gag, he unfastened his belt; which done, he forced his opponent's hands down and, kneeling on one while he held the other, got the strap under and round, so that with a quick tug through the buckle he had both wrists tightly bound to his sides.

The gag was now half off, and Bunsen snarled the while like a wolf, too madly angry to articulate his words, but with hate and murder and all the evil passions looking out of his eyes and struggling for expression at his lips. Bunny was adjusting the gag more securely, being anxious lest Bunsen should fulfil his threat of shouting for help, when the door opened and Geoff reappeared.

"Hullo!" exclaimed that astonished individual; "what's up? Have there been ructions again?"

"Just a bit—he tried to murder me by strangulation, that's all!" laughed Bunny; "but I've made him safe and harmless for a while, anyhow. He wanted to rouse the town by yelling, so I thought I'd better put his nosebag on."

"Yes," said Geoff; "quite right! I was afraid we should have to do something of the sort." He approached Bunsen in order to see that he was not bound or gagged so tightly as to cause pain or discomfort in breathing; but Bunsen kicked savagely at him.

"We shall have to tie him to a chair and leave him," said Geoff. "It's getting late—

going on for three. Lend a hand, Bunny, and we'll fix him up in no time."

Between them, and at the expense of a few kicks and many scowls of deadly hatred, they placed their man in a comfortable chair, tying him securely into it, hands and feet, and re-arranging the gag so that it could not by any efforts of his be displaced.

And there they left him, to wait for daylight and the arrival of the Boer woman who came daily to see to his rooms and his breakfast.

"I'm sorry to treat you like this, Bunsen," said Geoff at parting; "but if you are ever in a position to consider the matter impartially you will see that I was obliged to act as I have, for you threatened to inform both against us and Vesta, and we cannot afford to leave you at large. One more word: if you should injure Vesta in any way, either by threatening her or by giving information, I swear that I will seek you out wherever you are, and when I find you the matter will not end with gagging and hand-tying. I forbid you to go to her house, even if you should have the opportunity."

Bunsen glared in response. If he could

have murdered Geoff at that moment by some process of slow torture, he would have done it gladly.

Then they left him and hastened away.

"Lock the door on the outside and take the key," said Geoff. "We don't want him about too early."

At the bank house they found Hugh and Rosenthal in a fever of anxiety, but the sight of both the brothers safe and smiling quickly restored them to equanimity.

"Are you all ready for a flitting?" said Geoff. "We must be off at once; it will begin to grow light in an hour, and by that time we must be well out of the town."

Within five minutes all was ready: the remains of the food had been cut into portable shapes and pocketed, flasks had been filled, and revolvers inspected.

Then downstairs the party crept, and out into the darkness. Geoff locked the door and took away the key. He looked up at the house. The upper windows were boarded and the lower ones shuttered; it did not wear the appearance of having been inhabited; assuredly no one would suspect it rather than any of its

neighbours, all equally dead to daily life and the presence of living man.

Geoff had secured a postcard at Bunsen's and had addressed it to Vesta, having hastily scrawled upon it: "All well; sorry it's impossible to call again. Don't let Guy be admitted on any pretext whatever."

This he posted as the party hastened through the streets, making for the nearest point at which the open country would be reached. They went quickly yet almost noiselessly; but they met no one, which, in the present deserted condition of the town, was not surprising.

In ten minutes they were out of immediate danger, and in fifteen the open country was reached. The two young Bigbys knew every inch of the district and quickly led the party towards a place—west of the town and in the Wonderfontein direction—where they knew of a spot which would make an excellent hiding-place.

By the time daylight had begun to render farther progress undesirable, if not dangerous, they had reached their intended sanctuary.

This was a pleasant spot by the side of a small river, a tributary of the Wilge, well off

the beaten track. The narrow valley was so full of rocks and boulders deposited by the river in ancient days, before it had fallen to its present humble estate, that hiding would, in case of need, be an easy matter, and discovery difficult.

Here they encamped for the day; and before breakfasting and settling down to sleep, which would be done by turns, two watching while two slept, a consultation was held in order to settle, if possible, the main points to be kept in view during the retreat.

"Has anyone a good idea?" asked Geoff.

Several were put forward in reply to this invitation—good, bad, and indifferent. Two were reserved for serious consideration.

The first of these was, though more or less ingenious, found impracticable when considered in detail. Stated shortly, it was as follows:—

"We are all four Boers—we are dressed as such, and must therefore support the character; but, unfortunately, two of us speak little or no Dutch. These two have therefore been wounded in the jaw or face, are bound up, and cannot speak. The other two have

also been wounded, but have practically recovered. We are returning to the front from the nearest hospital."

This proposed plan was greeted with no little laughter, and even Bunny, who was its author, was quite alive to the humour of it.

It would be so remarkable, all agreed, that two out of four should have been so badly wounded in the jaw that even after coming out of hospital they should still be unable to speak. The plan might work brilliantly with one silent member, but two such just made the difference and rendered the thing absurd.

"It would be so very awkward, too, if the doctor at the front insisted on treating us," said Jack, "as he probably would."

"Or if," added Hugh, "the Commandant happened to be a soft-hearted kind of an individual and sent us back to hospital to be better stuck together."

So this ingenious plan of Bunny's was rejected.

The second suggested scheme was the offspring of Hugh's brain, and was considered so promising that it was at once adopted, *nem. con.*, with congratulations to the author.

Hugh's plan was as follows :—

"Geoff and Bunny are Boers. We others are loyalist farmers: Englishmen with farms in the Transvaal or Free State, who have been commandeered under heavy penalties to serve against the Queen's troops. We are unwilling to fight against the English, whom we regard as our own people. You other two have been privately requested to bring us to the front and to keep an eye upon our movements. You are to request the field-cornet to place us, the suspected ones, in those positions where the bullets are likely to fly pretty thickly. In the end we hope to be employed upon outpost duty, and shall then take the first opportunity to slip out and get within the British lines."

"Yes," said Geoff, when Hugh had finished the exposition of his plan; "that's good. I think it had better remain at this, boys. What do you others think?"

All hailed the scheme with acclamation, and Geoff pronounced it to have been adopted *nem. con.*

The next question was, What point should be made the objective for the "retirement

from Johannesburg"? And after consideration it was determined that this should be somewhere near De Aar or Colesberg, or wherever a British division should happen to be found, about those parts.

Which knotty and important point being settled, two of the party stretched themselves out for a sleep, while the remaining pair remained awake to watch, to take their turn of rest at midday.

CHAPTER XX

COMMANDEERING A MOUNT

SO far as any danger from the inquisitiveness of the population was concerned, no fears need have been entertained. The country through which our little party travelled was as bare of male population as a turnip-field is of strawberries. There were women in the towns and villages, but no men; the town guard of some of these places was composed of lads of thirteen years, who were to be seen being drilled in the work they were expected to do in defence of their homes, and seemed to take the matter very seriously.

But tramping through the country was weary work indeed, and more than one of the party became very footsore after two days of it.

But horses were extremely scarce and dear,

and the four men between them had by this time scarcely money enough to buy a single one. Nevertheless, after consultation, it was determined to obtain one, at anyrate, by fair means; it would be a relief to ride from time to time, and they could mount the beast by turns. If any more should be required, it must be obtained by foul means.

"Stolen, do you mean?" said Geoff, in some surprise. "I don't know that I quite like the idea." It was Jack Rosenthal who had suggested it.

"We can easily note the address and send the value afterwards," he explained. "Nobody will be any the worse; we can pay them a full price when the time comes."

"We'll buy one first and see how we get on," said Geoff.

But at the first farmhouse reached after this understanding there lived an old Boer who was one of the old-fashioned uncompromising Anglophobes. The old fellow was far too old to fight, though he explained that he had taken a hand at Majuba, and had had the pleasure of shooting five rooineks.

"Why didn't you shoot a dozen of the

rascals while you were about it?" said Bunny; "scum of the earth that they are!"

"Ah, scum of the earth, indeed!" said the old Boer. "We oughtn't to have let any of them live, last time; that's where the mistake was. However, things are going pretty well, they tell me, down at the Modder and at Kimberley, where Rhodes is living on a crust a day and in hourly terror of being caught and shot."

"Hah! we're off to lend a hand in that business; we've had a turn already, and lost our horses. Don't happen to have any for sale, do you?"

"I had ten, but they were all commandeered except one—my old saddle-nag. I'm keeping him to ride to Pretoria to see Rhodes shot in the market-place."

"Ah, that would be a grand sight, indeed!" said Geoff; "but we've got to catch him first. They say he's very slim."

"Oh, he may be that, but old Cronje is slim also! I know Cronje; I've fought with him. He's as sly as an old jackal. Where do you come from?"

"Krugersdorp," said Geoft.

"And you?" continued the old man, addressing Hugh, who did not understand a word of what he said, — "same place, I suppose?"

"He comes from Krugersdorp too," said Geoff, wishing to save the trouble of explaining that Hugh was — as arranged — a commandeered Englishman.

"Why doesn't he say so, instead of standing there like a stuffed cow?" said the Boer.

"He's had a shock — concussion — poor fellow, from one of the new English shells," said Geoff. "He can't speak."

"And he's going to fight again? That's the kind of man for me. Shake hands, lad; give us your hand."

"Shake hands with him," whispered Bunny, standing near; and Hugh promptly took the hint and did so.

"I say, Hugh," Geoff laughed, presently, when the party had left the farm after having lunched well at the old Boer's expense; "this won't do—you must bind your head up when we're among Boers; you nearly gave the show away. The old boy said you stood there like a stuffed cow, and I had to explain that

you got concussion from a shell, and have lost the use of your voice."

"He seemed to like me all the same," said Hugh. "He shook hands as if he had suddenly discovered I was his long-lost grandson."

"That was because I told him you were going to fight in spite of being a stuffed cow. Another fellow might not be so easily satisfied, unless you're bound up a bit. You see, you ought to know *some* Dutch if you're a farmer on Boer soil."

So Hugh promised to swathe his head in a bandage next time, and indeed made a point of doing so in future whenever there were Boers to be dealt with.

Jack knew a little Dutch—quite enough, he said, for a really loyalist farmer.

But the need of horses became urgent, for Bunny's feet were sore, and the slight wound he had received at his capture bothered him to some extent.

"We must have a couple of horses at least," he said. "Jack's plan is a perfectly justifiable one. We can find out the address of the people we 'borrow' the animals from before

helping ourselves. Besides, it wouldn't be wise to spend all we have on a horse when we still have so far to go."

There was sense in this, and it was agreed to adopt Jack's plan, and borrow two horses at least. An opportunity soon came.

It came in a small township, some sixty miles south-west of Johannesburg. The party tramped into the place weary and limping, and inquired at an inn for horses.

"To buy?" asked the innkeeper. "Where are your own?"

"Our two are both shot," said Geoff, nodding at Bunny; "the other two fellows are English farmers; all their horses were commandeered, and now they have to go to the front themselves; they don't like it," he added, in a low tone. "We're here to see they get along, and I tell you we have our hands full."

"So you want to mount them? Why, they'll ride away on your horses first thing, and go back to their farms."

"Not they—we have the guns, my friend; they're to have a rifle apiece when they get to the front, not before."

"Well, do as you like with the nags; it

doesn't matter to me, so long as I get my money for them."

With the words mine host disappeared into his yard, in order to fetch the horses, reappearing presently with a groom-lad, each holding a horse.

"Trot them up and down," said Geoff; "let's see how they move."

As the groom led the leading horse past Jack, who stood in the road, that conspirator tripped up the lad and sprang upon the back of the beast, which instantly broke into a startled gallop.

"Thunder!" shouted Geoff, "he's off with the horse! Give me the other, quick!" He fired two shots into the blue heavens, and seizing the bridle of the second animal, jumped on his back and dashed off in pursuit. "See to the other fellow, Jan!" he shouted back to Bunny, who promptly laid hold of Hugh, as though alarmed lest he too should attempt a bolt.

The owner was entirely deceived. Down the road he ran in a vain attempt to keep the horses in view, and shouting for someone to stop or to shoot the thieving rascal.

A man ran out of a house near the end of

the town. "Who has to be shot—which of them?" he shouted, getting his rifle unslung and placing it to his shoulder.

"The front one. Stop him, Heinrich, for the love of Heaven!—he is stealing a horse. The other fellow will never catch him on old Willem."

Heinrich fired a couple of shots in quick succession. The leading horseman, at the second report, was seen to start and shout something to his pursuer.

"The second got him!" said Heinrich; "he won't ride far." By this time all the inhabitants of the village—women and children—had rushed out of their houses to see the fun. Bunny and Hugh rushed down the road with the rest of the population. The innkeeper ran, panting and swearing, alongside of them. "I shall lose my horse, all through your confounded friend!" he said. "I wish to thunder you had never come my way!"

Bunny reassured the man.

"You needn't fear," he said; "he's a rich man, and you'll get the value of it one day, if Piet doesn't catch him. Ask for Rosenthal's farm outside Pretoria when the war's over."

"I'd rather have my horse now!" said the man angrily; "and I shall see I don't lose sight of *you*, my friend, until I get it."

"Well, you'd better follow me to the front, if that's the case," said Bunny, laughing; "for my orders are to get there myself and bring this fellow along as quickly as possible. Therefore if you attempt to stop me I shall shoot you off-hand in the name of the Republic."

The Boer altered his tone at this threat. "Well, do your best for me. I must have my horse—both horses. Is that other fellow to be trusted—the one that pursued?"

"Absolutely; you are sure of your horses or their money-value. You could claim from Government if he didn't pay."

"What's his name and address? Give me that, and we'll say no more about detaining you."

Bunny gave the address as Piet Kuyper, Bokfontein Farm, near Johannesburg, and was allowed to depart in peace, together with Hugh.

They met a few straggling boys and the man with the rifle. These had given up the chase, and reported that both horses had galloped right away over the veldt.

"The front man won't ride far—he has a bullet in him," said Heinrich proudly.

"I hope to goodness the rascal is lying," said Hugh, hurrying forward anxiously. "We didn't bargain for Jack to be shot at by anyone but Geoff."

But when they had proceeded for a couple of miles or more they came upon a sorry sight.

Jack Rosenthal lay in the shade of a boulder by a brook, looking pale and sick; his coat was off and his shirt-sleeve rolled to the shoulder, and Geoff bent over him washing and doctoring his arm, half-way between elbow and shoulder, where the quickly-flowing blood showed that he had been struck by Heinrich's bullet.

Jack was in considerable pain. He believed the bone was chipped or shattered, but the bullet had passed clean through his arm, passing out at the opposite side.

"I shall feel better presently," he said, smiling. "I've been abusing poor Geoff like a pickpocket—I thought he had shot me instead of firing wide."

"When you feel up to it, old man, you'd better mount the horse and ride on a bit, in

case of pursuit," said Hugh; "the old boy who owns the horses seems extremely angry."

So Jack was helped to mount, and the party rode on for five or six miles, until a pretty farm was reached, standing at the foot of a wooded hill. Here they stopped, lifting Jack from his saddle, and asked for food and shelter. A few Kaffirs were working in the fields, but no white men were to be seen, and the sole inhabitants appeared to be two Boer women, mother and daughter.

These good souls soon proved themselves to be of the sympathetic kind; true women, whose hearts would ever beat high with pity for the wounded and distressed, who would ask no questions, but simply afford help and comfort for the love of humanity.

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said the old *Tante*. "Wounded, I see! Oh, the cruel war! Let him come in. Run up and prepare the guest-room, Marta, while I fetch food."

Both women bustled out, leaving the four men in the kitchen.

"Dear, good souls!" said Geoff; "it goes against the grain to deceive such people, yet deceive them we must, I suppose. They'll

want to know all about us, and we must be consistent and stick to our fable about commandeered loyalists and so on."

When next Tante entered the room Geoff spoke to her: "I think we ought to tell you, Tante, that the wounded man is an Englishman, and so is this other; they have been commandeered for service against their own people, and are naturally averse to the work."

"None the worse for that! Farmers, I suppose, in Transvaal territory or the Free State?"

"Just so, Tante. I will tell you, further, that we were obliged, owing to the weariness of travelling on foot, to borrow two horses at the village of Hartefontein. We intend to return or pay for them, but the owner thought us to be evil folk and robbers, and fired upon us as we left the village. That is how this one is wounded."

"You commandeered the beasts after a fashion, that is: you required them for the service of the Allied States. I do not consider that very wrong, in war; if you are sure that the owner will be recompensed, he will suffer no harm."

"Thank you for your kind words, Tante. You will not, then, turn our sick man out of doors?"

"God forbid!" said the Tante piously. "But in case you should be pursued, it would be as well if you two rode away meanwhile—when you have eaten—into the wood, while these two remain in bed. I will see they are not disturbed, and will direct the pursuers over the veldt—if you are sure that the man will be paid for his horses."

"Indeed, Tante, he shall. You shall give me his name—it is the innkeeper at Hartefontein—and I pledge my word he shall be paid."

"Then there is no harm done. Here is the dinner—eat, all, and welcome."

When Geoff and Bunny had finished their meal they went out, in order to hide themselves, and especially their horses, for a while, as Tante suggested, in the wood. But they had scarcely set foot in the yard when Geoff hurried back into the house.

"Go up and get into bed quickly, both of you," he said. "There are four fellows riding down the road. I've examined them through my glasses, and I'm almost certain one is Guy

Bunsen! Keep a stained rag round your head, Hugh, and be badly wounded and unconscious. Thank God he doesn't know either of you by sight! Still, there's danger if it *is* Bunsen!"

CHAPTER XXI

BUNSEN RETURNS EMPTY

GEOFF made no mistake when he declared that he had seen Guy Bunsen riding with three Boers towards the farm; Bunsen it was. Let me explain in a very few words how he came to be there. We left him gagged and tied to a chair in his own room in Johannesburg. In this uncomfortable position he remained for several hours, but was eventually released, at about seven in the morning, by his next-door neighbour, who had an interesting tale to tell him. This man had been roused at night by the noise of quarrelling in Bunsen's rooms. Being of an inquisitive disposition, he had dressed himself and watched Bunsen's door. Very early in the morning two men had issued forth and passed cautiously down the road—he following. He had tracked them at a distance until they disappeared into a house,

but he was too far away to distinguish which house it was, for there was no light. Very soon afterwards he heard them leave once more and pass down the road. From this point he followed them—again at a respectful distance—until he became aware that they made for the open country in the Meyerton direction. Then he returned, and contriving to open Bunsen's door, entered his rooms, where he was shocked to discover their proprietor gagged and in bonds. He released him and reported his action in following and marking down the evilly-disposed persons who had maltreated Bunsen; whereat the latter piously thanked Heaven and also his neighbour, and added, less piously, that he would be revenged upon the scoundrels if it occupied a whole lifetime to carry out a suitable vengeance.

Afterwards, he visited the police department, where he laid information of the presence in Johannesburg of two English spies. They were known to him and their object was known to him; he also knew in which direction they had escaped, and how they might be captured.

"Wait a minute," said the official. "Who are you?"

Guy gave his name. The official turned over a pile of letters and selected one—that, in fact, which Geoff had posted: Guy's own.

"This is your application; it appears that you also wish to depart"—

"I can wait; I am willing to ride first with your men in pursuit of these persons."

"Well, I warn you, your conduct is suspicious. Why do you give information against these people?"

"They are enemies of mine—I hate them."

"H'm; are they not rather confederates, anxious to escape in one direction while you turn our attention in another?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Bunsen. "I never thought of it. I want these men caught and shot."

"Oh! a private vendetta! What can you prove against them that transgresses martial law?"

"I can prove that they are English scouts, and cannot have been in Johannesburg for any honest purpose."

"Very well; accompany my men in pursuit; but remember that you may compromise your-

self in this matter. If these men are not to be found where you seek them, questions will arise."

"I must risk it. I want them caught, I tell you."

So Bunsen rode out presently with his three policemen, and for two days scoured the country in search of some traces of the fugitives, but found none, because the four friends had been careful to travel for the first fifty miles by night, and had, moreover, avoided all towns and villages, and even farms.

From the first the inspector was sceptical as to the existence of the fugitives, and did not conceal his dislike and distrust of Bunsen. He had had enough of the foolish enterprise, as he considered it, long before he reached the farm in which, had he known it, the objects of his search—in whose very existence he disbelieved—had just eaten their dinner.

Geoff's warning was not a minute too soon; for five minutes later, when Geoff and Bunny had led their horses safely into the wood, and Hugh and Jack had bundled—half-dressed—into two beds, Hugh with a terrible blood-stained rag tied about his head—up rode the

three Boer policemen, and with them Guy Bunsen.

It happened that these four men had not passed through the village of Hartefontein, and knew nothing of the episode of the horses; therefore they did not inquire for horse-stealers, but for two spies supposed to have passed in this direction—Englishmen.

Anna declared stoutly that she knew of no spies; she had two wounded men, English farmers, upstairs, but no one in the nature of a spy.

"Ah!" said Bunsen, "we must see these men. I think we have caught them, Mr. Inspector; you will not be so ready to doubt me next time."

"Well, let's see them," growled the man addressed, who did not seem greatly in love with the enterprise upon which Guy had led him and his men.

Anna's heart sank, for she felt that matters were becoming complicated. If this were really a question of spies and their pursuit and capture, she wished she had not taken in such persons. Nevertheless, she had promised protection, and she did her best to extend it.

"Save yourselves the trouble of examining them; they are only poor wounded fellows, English farmers, commandeered to our service and shot in trying to escape," she said. But the inspector pushed roughly past her.

"Out of the way, Tante," he growled; "you must not attempt to shield such people, or you may get into trouble."

The girl Marta burst into tears at this point, in pure pity for the fate she believed about to be in store for her handsome guests.

"It is a hateful war!" she cried.

Guy accompanied the police upstairs. They entered the room tearfully pointed out to them, and the inspector approached first the bed upon which lay Hugh, his head tied up, his eyes rolling wildly, and his hand catching at imaginary flies between his pillow and the ceiling.

Luckily Bunsen did not know Hugh—he had never seen either him or Jack Rosenthal, and had therefore no suspicion as to their identity.

With a muttered curse of disappointment Guy turned away from Hugh's bedside and walked up to Jack's.

"No," he said; "we must go farther—these are not the rascals we want."

"Come away then!" said the inspector surlily. "We've wasted time enough already in this foolish wild-goose chase."

"Come, mount, and let's get this nonsense over," he continued irritably; and one of his men added, to Bunsen's evident discomfiture—

"I have been wondering, inspector, whether this man has not played the fox with us in this matter, dragging us away in one direction while his accomplices escape scot-free in another. Is it not a matter to be inquired into?"

"I have thought the same," said the inspector; "the circumstances are suspicious. Why, after all, should this Englishman desire to ruin other Englishmen?—it is not natural. I do not love the English, but they hang together."

"See how his face pales; our words terrify him," said the other.

'If I were sure of his guilt I would telegraph for leave to shoot him," added the inspector. "At anyrate let him not think that he has escaped punishment, for this matter shall be carefully investigated at Johannesburg."

"I have already explained, Mr. Inspector," said Bunsen, "that these two men are my bitter enemies, one being my rival, and that I hate

them, and they me. I can prove that they were in Johannesburg, and that they left in this direction."

"Bah! I trust you no further. Right about face, men—we ride back to the town. These are no times for the chasing of wild geese. This man may continue his arguments when we have reached Johannesburg."

And with the words the party turned and rode back the way they came.

When Geoff and Bunny returned to the farm presently, very jubilant, having watched Bunsen and his party ride away, they found Hugh, no longer the bloodstained, delirious warrior, endeavouring to make pretty Marta understand how deeply grateful he was to herself and her mother for their kindness and loyalty. Marta knew very little English, but she sat and smiled very sweetly, looking admiringly at the handsome Englishman and wondering what all the talk was about.

Her mother also entered, but her face was somewhat grave; and immediately following her came Geoff and Bunny.

Geoff took the Tante's hand and solemnly kissed it, thanking her courteously and gravely

for the great service she had rendered to his party. "We shall never forget your kindness, Tante," he ended, "and maybe one day we shall find a way to show our gratitude."

The good woman looked kindly but somewhat sorrowfully in his eyes.

"I do not grudge what I have done for you," she said, sighing, "but I did not know that I had taken spies into my house. Had I known it I must have thought twice before admitting you."

"Oh no, Tante, not spies; indeed we are not spies. Did he tell you that? He is my rival and my enemy, Tante. See now how it is: I am to marry a Boer lady in Johannesburg, and he is also in love with her. I am an Englishman, Tante, and—stay, I will tell you the whole truth, for it is due to your kindness that we conceal nothing from you, and I am sure that you will not betray us." And Geoff told the good soul the whole history of the release and escape, and of the adventures in Johannesburg, exactly as we know them; for—he explained afterwards—"When you get hold of a woman like that, one who acts up to her promises even though she suspects you of deceiving her, why,

hang it, you *must* face the music and tell her the whole truth, or you'll never again feel twopennorth of self-respect!" A sentiment in which, to their credit, all cordially concurred.

And as for old Tante, she cried over their troubles and trials, and especially over the romantic portions of Geoff's narrative, and said that the war was an odious thing, and that Geoff had behaved as she would wish her own son to behave in such matters, and—in fact—that she was sincerely glad she had befriended them all.

"My good man is at the front," she ended, "and two sons—Marta's brothers—and God knows whether I shall ever see them again."

"Tell me their names and where they are fighting, Tante, and, who knows?—strange things happen in war-time—we might befriend them."

Then Tante gave the names of husband and sons, Karl Nederlander and Willem and George Nederlander, which Geoff promised to remember.

The party remained three days at the farmhouse, for Jack was feverish and his wound was painful; but on the fourth day the fever

left him, and feeling better, he declared that he thought they should be pushing on.

Hugh was for staying here a while longer.

"Better give your arm a chance, Jack," he said; "it's better to-day, but it may be all wrong again to-morrow. Tante won't mind our staying another couple of days."

"Nor Marta either, eh, old man?" said Jack; whereat Bunny and Geoff laughed, and Hugh—after looking surprised and pained for a moment—blushed and laughed also.

"I daresay not," he said awkwardly—"you'd better ask her."

"No need, sonny!" said Jack.

Nevertheless they stayed two more days; and when at last the time came to go, old Tante declared that she felt ashamed to be so sorry to part with four enemies of her country and people.

"We shall all be friends one day, Tante; and the best of friends too!" said Geoff.

"Amen!" said the good old lady.

As for Marta, she was quite upset at the break-up of the party, and declared that it was most unwise to allow Jack to travel so soon after receiving his wound.

"I will come and see you one day, Marta, when the war's over," Hugh whispered as they said good-bye to one another. "Shall I?"

Marta did not reply in words—she was not much of a hand at English—but her eyes spoke volumes in a language which was neither Dutch nor English; and the blush and smile which accompanied the eye-speech became her admirably, so that the last impression of the girl left on the minds of her guests—especially of one of them—was a very pleasant one.

To that one it proved as lasting as it was agreeable!

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE BOER LINES

THE question now to be decided by the fugitives was how best to proceed to the front, and for what particular point to direct their way.

Mafeking was undoubtedly the nearest place at which hostilities actually raged about this time.

"Shall we help to invest Mafeking?" asked Geoff, a council having been called upon this weighty matter soon after the hospitable farm-house of old Tante Nederlander had been left — regretfully — behind them. But no one seemed anxious to wait about outside Mafeking.

"Baden Powell isn't going to throw up the sponge," said Hugh; "and as for running the gauntlet and joining our fellows there, there's no particular advantage in that. I'd rather

stay outside and take a hand in the war; besides, we should be four more mouths to feed."

This seemed to be the general feeling. No one desired to be boxed up for an indefinite period. Better to join the fighting line at some point where the opposing hosts were encamped, as it were, in the open.

Kimberley was rejected for the same reason.

"Dare we make for Kroonstad, take the train there for Bloemfontein, and on straight through to Colesburg, or near it? There's a British force about those parts, under French." This was Bunny's suggestion.

At anyrate it would be safe enough to make for Kroonstad; there they might learn the news, and act according to information picked up.

So Kroonstad was made the immediate objective point; and there they learned that Methuen, with a large force, had pushed his way up as far as the Modder River, driving the enemy slowly before him.

"There you are—that's our billet!" said Geoff. "We'll join Cronje's forces and find our way across to Methuen at the first opportunity. Hands up for Modder River!"

All hands and all voices were raised in favour of this plan; and without a moment's delay the party set forth once more, travelling as quickly as four men, one of whom is more or less invalided, can conveniently travel with but two horses among them. Hugh still wore the bandage over his jaws whenever the haunts of men were approached, his ignorance of Dutch being, apparently, the only serious danger of the enterprise; for no one suspected that the party of men were anything but what they represented themselves, namely, a couple of Boers moving to the front, in charge of two semi-English farmers commandeered against their will, and therefore under some suspicion.

As the four venturesome travellers came nearer the Boer lines on the hills behind Kimberley they occasionally met groups of men going in the opposite direction. Some of these appeared to avoid all intercourse, and when greeted, proved very uncommunicative.

"Those chaps have had enough of it, and are going home," said Hugh — "mark my words! Probably Free-Staters."

The horrible battle of Magersfontein had already taken place when they reached the

Boer laagers, and terrible tales were told the new arrivals on all sides of the carnage that distinguished the fighting of that day.

Very sad were those four English hearts when they heard of it, and the only comfort they could find in the matter was, that the version told in the Boer camp would probably be exaggerated.

The interview with the field-cornet to whom it fell to deal with their case passed off satisfactorily, though Geoff required all his ready wit in order to steer through it in safety.

The four men were sent into Field-Cornet Hugerdorp's presence in order to be registered, and to have their positions and duties assigned.

"Who are these fellows?" he asked of the Boer who brought them in.

"Two Boers from Pretoria and two commandeered English farmers caught returning to their farms, wounded, but turned back by the other two."

"Oh, that will be a matter of a fine, my friend," said the officer, addressing Hugh. "State your excuse for retiring without permission."

Hugh put his hand to his plastered and

bandaged jaw, and made a pretence of attempting to speak and of finding articulation impossible.

"He is pretty tightly bandaged, Mr. Field-Cornet, and can't speak," said Geoff. "This other one is wounded also, but has nearly recovered. I met them both and turned them back; they can squat in a trench and fire a rifle as well as others who are without bullet-holes in their chops. If I may venture to make a suggestion," he added confidentially, lowering his voice and approaching the table at which the field-cornet sat, "I should put them where they won't easily get away: they'll cut and run for their farms again if they get a chance."

"Oh, never fear; I have a special trench or two for shirkers. As to yourself and this other, you say you come from Pretoria; if from Pretoria, why have you had no orders for the front before this?"

"We have been under Joubert at Ladysmith from the beginning, but we were sent up with prisoners, and afterwards told to join the forces behind Kimberley. We have now come straight down, *viâ* Kroonstad."

"Very well. Go to Field-Cornet Leyden, right flank, Kroonstad commando, and bid him place these fellows; tell him the circumstances under which you found them, and he will know where to put them. As you know them by sight you had better be placed somewhere near them, in case of their attempting any tom-foolery: you understand. You need not fight in the same trench—in fact, I should advise you to keep out of theirs."

This suited them very well.

Geoff had no intention of repeating the fabulous story of his two runaway English farmers when in the presence of Field-Cornet Leyden. Had he done so, that officer would have placed them in some death-trap reserved for those under suspicion of half-hearted devotion to the Boer cause. But the knowledge of Leyden's name and the position of his commando was useful, and the four men promptly joined the commando in question, which was laagered on the extreme right side of the Magersfontein position.

The next thing was to get employed, all four of them, upon picket duty—if that could be arranged; for once outside the Boer lines, upon

some outpost job, there would be little difficulty in getting across to their own people.

But though Geoff now changed his tune and lauded to the skies the wonderful loyalty of these two commandeered farmers of English blood, he did not succeed in convincing his Boer companions of their trustworthiness.

"It may be as you say," one slim old Boer told him, "and that they are as keenly anxious for the success of our cause as we ourselves are; but I don't like that kind of loyalty. If they are not friendly to their own people, they ought to be. Better not to trust such men."

"Slim!" was Geoff's comment upon this advice.

So for a while the prospect of escape was put back, and the only comfort in life was to listen to the banging of the English guns, two or three miles away, and to see the enemy scuttle into their trenches, like rabbits into their holes, when the lyddite shells came screaming towards the lines, to burst and tear great furrows in the hillsides. "Old Methuen showing his teeth," as Bunny called it.

For two or three weeks this sort of thing

went on: no greater comfort to be had than the staring at puffs of British smoke in the distance, and getting out of the way of British shells which followed the puffs; no opportunity to go out upon picket duty; no movement in the camp; nothing to do.

Then at last there came a ripple in the stagnant water of existence.

One night Geoff was called out upon picket duty. He tried hard to obtain permission for Bunny and the rest to be of the party, but without success.

"Yours is the only name on the list, out of the four you mention," he was told. "We can't let all go who would like to do outpost work: we should have the whole army volunteering." The four friends consulted as to Geoff's enterprise.

"Of course I shall not go over to-night," said Geoff. "I shall wait till we can all go together."

"Get over while you can!" said they. "We shall follow pretty soon."

But Geoff would not hear of it. "No," he said; "we'll stand or fall together when we do go. I shall come back to laager this time."

But man can only propose: the disposing is in other hands.

When the picket returned in the morning they returned with two men short, Geoff and another; and in the English papers, two days later, there appeared this paragraph, among other items of war news:—

"Modder River. — Some of Babbington's troopers shot two Boers engaged in sniping our outposts last Thursday."

Bunny had known two or three of the men engaged in this little affair, and had seen them arrive in the morning.

"Where is my brother, Pieter Kuyper?" he asked, much alarmed to find that Geoff had not returned with them.

"Shot, poor lad; shot dead early in the night," said an elderly Boer. "We'd have brought his body in, but we were pressed ourselves. He's not the only good lad killed in this *verdomte* war."

Bunny returned dazed, to tell the others the terrible news. He found them sitting outside the trenches, staring, as usual, at the English position.

"Geoff's shot"— he contrived with difficulty

to articulate; then he fell forward and lay on the hillside, sobbing, with his face in his hands.

Was this to be the end of all the cleverness and devotion with which his dear brother had conducted the enterprise from beginning to end, and all for his sake! Poor Bunny groaned aloud, and prayed with all his soul that the Boer might have lied or made a mistake, and that Geoff might still have been alive when left for dead on the veldt.

"Cheer up, old man!" said Hugh bravely. "Ten to one he was only wounded and will crawl in presently; or maybe he simply shammed, in order to go over and see an English face or two, and then come back to us."

"I wish to Heaven I could think so," Bunny groaned. He was, however, somewhat comforted by Hugh's suggestion.

But two or three days passed without bringing any news of Geoff, and Bunny openly, and Hugh in his heart of hearts, grew more and more despairing.

"If only they'd employ us and give us a chance of getting out of this," said Bunny;

"one might hear something of him in our own camp. I shan't be able to bear it long. If nothing happens I shall be off on my own hook. Could you get along now without me to do the talking?"

"I doubt it, though I know a lot more Dutch than I did; but in any case don't do anything rash, Bunny—rashness was always your fault, you know!"

"If I do, it will be because I can't help it!" said Bunny. "I tell you I can't stand this much longer."

But exciting days were coming near. The English were becoming more active every hour. There was a minor skirmish or two—mostly affairs of outposts; nearly every day there was at least some movement; and the three Englishmen began to have hopes of an end coming to the stagnant life and the suspense from which they suffered. One night the Boers shot a couple of Englishmen near their own lines,—two poor fellows who had scouted too adventurously,—and brought them in for burial. They performed the rite with reverence, a number of them standing over the grave and singing a hymn.

"It's really very decent of them," said Jack, impressed. "Look, Hugh, there's an old boy going to preach now ; listen with all your ears, and let's see if we can make out what he says."

They came nearer and listened. The old Boer spoke eloquently as to the hard duties of soldiers in war-time, one of the hardest of which was to be compelled to shoot down plucky fellows as brave as themselves, and as patriotic from their own point of view.

"Oh the pity of it!" was the burden of his remarks.

Hugh overheard a young Boer say, with a laugh, that old Nederlander dearly loved to hear himself speak, and never missed an opportunity of putting in a word in season.

"Let him be," said the other. "He's one of the old school—prays hard and fights hard!"

Afterwards Hugh approached the older man and asked him in English whether he was the same burgher Nederlander who had a farm up towards the north of the State, near Kroonstad ; and when he learned that this was in truth Marta's father, he gave the old man—to

his great delight—the last personal news of his wife and daughter, adding that he owed a deep debt of gratitude to the good ladies, who had treated him with more than ordinary kindness.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT LAST

THE two men stood talking beside a huge boulder that towered above one of the Boer trenches upon the side of the hill. Suddenly Hugh dragged the older man unceremoniously behind the rock, and the same instant a shell, bursting within thirty yards of them, knocked both men off their feet. Three Boers who had stood near them before they sheltered behind the boulder were killed on the spot.

The old man shook hands with Hugh. "Thank you," he said, "you have repaid my wife's hospitality by saving my life; next time you pass the farm you must look in and receive her thanks."

Then Hugh, seeing an opportunity for making a dash, took from his pocket and pushed into the hand of the old man a little paper

packet, which he blushingly asked the burgher to give to his daughter on his return home.

"Ask her to keep it till I come for it," he stammered. "Marta will understand."

"Oh-h!" said the old man; "is it thus, then! But are you not one of the commandeered English subjects who are treacherously fighting against their own people?"

"I am English, yes; as for fighting, I have fired a few shots at the sun," said Hugh, smiling. "I am here because I must."

"Nay—take back the parcel—my daughter shall receive no presents from those who are disloyal to their own people: such men would make bad husbands."

In vain poor Hugh endeavoured to explain that he was not, in reality, disloyal; the old Boer was clearly averse to the idea of an English lover for his daughter, and Hugh was obliged, regretfully, to pocket the little souvenir he wished to send to pretty Marta.

"I will justify myself when the war is over," he said; and old Nederlander replied that if that were so none would be gladder than he, for that a traitor to his country was a poor creature indeed.

Hugh was not very good company at this time: he had a double anxiety at his heart; for besides the uncertainty as to Geoff's fate, he had to bear that peculiarly gnawing care familiar to all who suddenly find that they have fallen in love with one from whose side they must long be absent. Bunny's grief over his beloved Geoff's disappearance was more poignant than his brother's, and he too was very miserable at this time. Jack Rosenthal strove bravely to communicate some cheerfulness to both of his companions, but with scant success.

It came as a relief to Bunny, one night, to be called up for his turn of scouting. He was one of those who had given in their names as willing to undertake this class of work, and at last his turn had come.

"For Heaven's sake don't disappear and give us another anxiety to bear!" said Hugh piteously. "We've about as much care on our hands already as we can carry."

But Bunny returned in the morning safe and sound, and full, moreover, of a scheme for the escape of the trio the very next night, having used his outing as a reconnaisance for the weal of the party.

"I scouted close to the British outposts," he said excitedly. "I could have gone over easily, but of course I wasn't going to desert you."

"Thank Heaven you didn't—that would have about finished me!" said Hugh.

"Well, what say you—both of you—to doing a little scouting 'on our own' to-night?" continued Bunny. "If we have any luck we shall cross the lines; you see, I have been once, and know the lie of the place."

Both Hugh and Jack were only too delighted to hear of a chance of escape; and when darkness fell, the three conspirators crept cautiously from their tent and, Bunny leading, got clear of their own laager.

"So far, so good!" whispered Bunny. "Now we've a bit of a walk before us, half-way to Jacobsdal, and then we cross the veldt till we strike a British picket."

Away went the three at a swinging trot, and once at least they were challenged.

"Scouts—ordered out from the Kroonstad commando," said Bunny. "We're bound for the British lines; don't delay us."

"Pass on, then," said the man. "It is mid-

night now: best be well out of the way of their bullets by four in the morning."

But for this little delay the three men pushed steadily forward, and they were scarcely aware how near they had come towards the English lines when a bullet whizzed over their heads, followed by a second, and an English voice called, "Halt! who goes there?"

Oh the joy of hearing English voices again! In the thrill and delightful shock of it the three men made no reply, but foolishly waited for the sentry to speak again. Instead, he fired another shot.

"Friends! we're friends, mate! Don't shoot us!" cried Hugh.

"Friends? What sort of friends are you that come by night from the enemy's lines?" shouted a voice back.

"Escaped prisoners from Pretoria"— began Bunny, but the man rudely interrupted him.

"Oh, rats!" he said. "You're some sneaking Boers prying about and got too near. Now you'll suffer for it—wait till I kill you dead."

"No, don't shoot again. Look at us closer and you'll see we are English, though in Boer clothes."

"Hold up your hands then and drop your rifles—one—two—three."

Down went the three rifles and up went the six hands. The sentry laughed.

"You know your surrender drill anyway!" he said; "and, by gumption, you're right to do as you're told! I should have shot you in a minute. Keep your hands up while I gather in the rifles, lads, and then you shall walk in wid me to the Colonel's."

"I say, this isn't exactly being received with open arms by our own people, is it?" said Jack, with a laugh. "What d'you take us for, Mr. Atkins? Can't you see we're as good English as you?"

"That's the Colonel's business," said the man; "there's plenty of bad characters about that talks good English."

Luckily the Colonel proved to be more amenable to persuasive arguments, and accepted the statement of the fugitives that they were indeed escaped English prisoners from Pretoria and nothing worse.

"But it's an extraordinary tale you tell," he said, "and I should like the C.O. to hear it; therefore don't conclude that I misbelieve

your statement *in toto* if I send you up to him."

So the three friends went up before the General-Commanding and repeated their tale to him, and received his congratulations. But when Bunny inquired whether anything had been heard of his brother Geoffrey, and hung upon the answer as a criminal hangs upon the lips of the judge about to pronounce sentence, his hopes were dashed to the ground, for the General immediately replied that he had heard no mention of an English refugee, either wounded or unwounded, and that if such a man had been brought into camp he would certainly have known of it.

"I am sorry I cannot give you hope," he said kindly, seeing Bunny's distress, "especially as your brother seems to have been a fine fellow indeed, and to have deserved better luck than to be killed by English bullets in the very hour of success."

Sadly, after this interview, the three friends left the camp and started upon their journey to Cape Town—sadly and silently. Geoff really dead—it seemed almost impossible to believe! Geoff the invincible, the resourceful, the ever

successful; Geoff the stalwart, the staunch friend, the merry companion, the man whom everyone must love and trust at sight—gone, shot dead in the moment of triumphant success, while they, for whom he had done so much, survived, full of life and vigour and, thanks mostly to his exertions, free men!

Moreover, to add to the personal sorrow, there was the misery to be faced of breaking the news to his mother: a grim obligation which haunted both Hugh and Bunny all the way to the Cape, and was ever before their eyes during the sea voyage thence to Durban. Who was to break the news?

Each brother offered to do so.

"Toss up," said Bunny; and the duty fell to Hugh.

"I think you'll do it better than I, old man," said Bunny; and Hugh replied that perhaps their mother would feel it less in the joyful hour of their return.

"Oh no," said Bunny; "that won't make any difference! We are we, and she'll be very, very glad to see us; but dear old Geoff was"— Poor Bunny broke off with a great sob.

Hugh finished the sentence—

"Yes," he said, sighing, "there was but one Geoff, that's certain!"

Mrs. Bigby's joy when her two sons were shown into her presence was so great that poor Bunny's heart seemed to rise in his throat. He could not help feeling even in that moment that this joy was unreal, because it had no secure foundation. Geoff was dead, and she must know it in a minute; and then her joy would change to sorrow. She had not asked for Geoff. Hugh had a breathing space —poor Hugh, how Bunny pitied him!

But inevitable troubles must be faced, and Hugh felt that he must get his task over.

"Dearest mother," he began falteringly, "I don't know how to say it, but we must. We are obliged to damp your joy, poor dear: there is something very, very sad to tell you"— poor Hugh paused, pale and agitated. Bunny took his mother's hand and held it in his own.

Mrs. Bigby looked surprised, then alarmed—

"You haven't heard bad news of father?" she faltered.

"No, no, mother; not that, not that!" said Hugh. "We"—

Mrs. Bigby gave a sigh of relief. Then she started—

"Oh, you have lost poor Jack Rosenthal—is that it?" she said.

Fate was unkind to poor Hugh. His mother would not understand, and he must end by blurting out the dreadful truth. Was it that such a calamity as Geoff's death was too great to be conceivable? Alas, then, how would she bear to hear the news? And, mystery of mysteries, why had she not inquired after Geoff?

"No, dear mother, Jack is safe," Hugh began. In another moment he would have had to make the plunge. But before he made it the door opened and a ghost entered—a pale, limping, sunken-eyed but widely-grinning and intensely happy ghost—the ghost of Geoff himself.

"Well done, dear old chaps!" said the ghost; "and where's Jack—all right? I knew you'd get through before long. I told you so, mother, didn't I? You got my message all right, I suppose? Why, what's up? You look as if you'd seen a ghost, both of you!'

. . . . . .

What a palavering, and a telling of experiences, and counter-telling—what a rejoicing and what health-drinking—took place half an hour later, at dinner!

First Geoff's experiences came out, and much had to be explained. He had been badly wounded—"knocked silly," as he expressed it—and carried into hospital to be treated. Then, as a Boer prisoner—for he had been too ill to explain, at first, the real circumstances—he was sent to the Cape to recruit. Hence the C.O.'s ignorance at Modder River. "But didn't you get my message?" continued Geoff. "I persuaded the doctor at hospital, when sending across his report of wounded Boers, to add a message to Jan Kuyper (giving your commando and position) that his brother Pieter Kuyper was doing well. I suppose the rascals on your side never took the trouble to let you know." This explained mystery No. 2, why Mrs. Bigby had not mentioned Geoff—she naturally supposed that they knew all about him!

Then Geoff continued, and narrated how, when he had recovered sufficiently to make it known that he was no Boer but an English

refugee, he was allowed to depart from the prisoners' hospital and to take passage by steamer to Durban, which he reached only a couple of days before the rest.

After Geoff's yarn came the story of the other three, which we know already.

"And you spoilt the whole thing," Bunny ended, "by coming in just as old Hugh was about to kill and bury you! He had his funereal expression on, all ready, and we had both of us really done our best to look as if we cared two hangs about it, which of course we didn't"—

At this critical moment the ghost hurled some missile—a cork or a piece of bread—which took effect upon the head of the disrespectful one; and the rest of the proceedings of this rowdy, happy evening it is not for the self-respecting historian to chronicle.

CHAPTER XXIV

EXEUNT OMNES

WHEN Geoff had called upon old Mr. Rosenthal, Jack's father, before his son's arrival, in order to inform him of the escape and of the fact that, given a little more luck, Jack and the others would soon pass within the British lines, since they were now "serving" on the edge of the Boer position, the millionaire could scarcely believe his ears.

"Do you seriously tell me you and Jack got clean out of Pretoria and away, and that he may be here any minute?" he exclaimed.

"Any minute—and my brothers Hugh and Bunny as well. We have had grand luck, on the whole, from start to finish."

The old man was much moved. He was silent for a moment or two, and blew his nose.

"Well, you're a set of fine lads, and especially

yourself," he said at last; "and I trust your wound won't bother you long—you're a bit of a wreck as yet, I see!"

"Oh, I shall be all right in no time, sir. Of course the only danger now is that some zealous British outpost fellow may have a shy at them as they cross over from the Boer lines; but they're accustomed to go carefully, and they won't be rash."

"Well, my boy, you know what I said, and I meant it: there's ten thousand pounds to your credit and your brother's, at any bank you like to name, on the day Jack reaches this place in safety. I said it should be so, and I want you to have the money."

But Geoff courteously allowed the generous old man to understand that it would be distasteful to him to receive a money reward, and that he would answer for his brother's sentiments in this matter as well as his own.

"Well, I think no worse of you for that,' said Mr. Rosenthal; "and what's more, I shall find some other way of showing my gratitude. There are good things to be had in Johannesburg for good men, and perhaps your brother won't be too proud to accept an appointment

that would save him the trouble of going back to Australia?"

"You are extremely kind, sir," Geoff laughed, "and I shall leave you and Hugh to settle that matter when he arrives."

And it may be said at once that Hugh, when he arrived, did actually come to some arrangement with Jack's father, which is likely—when the war-clouds have cleared away, and the shutters and boards have been removed from Johannesburg windows, letting in, once more, the sunshine of peace and prosperity—to prove a lucrative one for Hugh. But in spite of this, and of the joy of freedom and the sense of a difficult enterprise satisfactorily achieved, Hugh went, at this time, somewhat heavily: he was pensive and quiet and unlike himself.

"You're in love, old man," said Bunny bluntly; "that's what's the matter."

"I don't know," Hugh sighed; "you may be right. I sometimes think I am — rather badly."

"Get out of it again, if you can; very few girls are worth worrying about so much as all that."

"Marta is!" said Hugh. "At least I think

so; I saw more of her than you did, and I'm certain she's as good as a girl can be."

"Well, she isn't bad looking, for a Boer girl, I'll admit that," said Bunny grudgingly; "but you'd better pull yourself together and forget her, old chap, for in all probability you'll never see her again."

"Shall I not?" said Hugh, smiling. "Do you know, Bunny, that the thought of seeing Marta again when the war's over is practically all I'm living for at the present moment?"

Then Bunny whistled a tune and went away, realising that Hugh was at present in that condition in which a man is not responsible for his words and actions, and must be given up as a bad job.

"He'll get over it," he said presently, discussing the matter with Geoff; "he surely wouldn't go and marry a Boer girl!"

"Vesta's one," said Geoff simply; and Bunny was obliged to whistle another tune, and to take another stroll.

"I think I won't interfere in these little matters again," he reflected; "I seem to put my foot in it whenever I try to do a kind thing."

A few days after this both Bunny and Hugh, weary of a fortnight of idleness while so many Englishmen were in the field, joined the Natal Carbineers and went once more to the front, where they were not long in proving themselves a real acquisition to that force, and made themselves a name as two of the most accomplished scouts and most intrepid and intelligent patrollers in the army.

Meanwhile a letter came for Geoff from Johannesburg. Vesta had secured its safe arrival by sending it to a friend at Lorenço Marquez, whence there would be no difficulty in forwarding it to Durban. This letter first enraged and then delighted Geoff, and the reason for both sentiments will be seen in the extract here given :—

"For a week after you went," Vesta wrote, "I heard nothing of Mr. Bunsen. If I had not received your note telling me that all was well with you, I should have been very anxious, for I should have connected his disappearance, somehow, with you, and imagined that he dared not come near me because he had done something treacherous to you. But he turned up at the house after a week and asked to see me.

The servants refused to admit him, which, they said, made him very angry. This happened on three consecutive days, and after that I received a threatening letter from him. He told me that if I persisted in being so rude as to refuse to see him, he would be obliged to take certain steps for his own protection in a serious matter as to which he was at issue with the authorities, steps which he would rather not take without first consulting me, because I was concerned in the said matter.

"I made an appointment to see him," the letter continued, "after this, because I was rather anxious to know what he could mean by the threat implied in his letter. I took care that my old nurse should be in the room, however, and told the maid to remain outside the door, in case I should require her. Besides this, I had my little revolver in my pocket, one which father gave me before he left. Mr. Bunsen came, and we had a great quarrel. He told me it was necessary, in order to justify himself, to prove to the authorities that you had lately been in Johannesburg and at this house, and that you had since departed. 'You mean,' I said, 'that the authorities require proof of a

statement you yourself have made to them, that Geoff has been in the town?' And when he deliberately admitted that this was so, and that he had even done his best to get you captured, I felt so angry that I ordered him out of the room.

"'If I go,' he said, 'I shall be obliged to refer the police people to *you*, and that would be unpleasant both for you and for your father.'

"'Do exactly as you please,' I said, 'only go at once, and never show your face in the house again.' I am afraid I also called him a coward.

"He was very angry, but he went; and soon afterwards I had a visit from the police inspector, who was a polite man, and whom I easily satisfied. He was not an admirer of Mr. Bunsen, I soon discovered; and when he asked me what truth there was in his statement that you had been to Johannesburg, disguised as a Boer, in order to spy, I told him (I hope you won't mind!) that I am engaged to be married to you, and that perhaps you had other and better motives for coming to Johannesburg than that of spying.

"He laughed and said something pretty. 'These English are queer folks,' he added; 'this one—Bunsen—must have good reasons for hating the other, since he did his best to get him caught by my men!'

"'Mr. Bunsen does not approve of our engagement, Mr. Inspector,' I said.

"'Oh!' he replied, smiling; 'is that it? Now I understand! Then perhaps you will not be sorry to hear that we have withdrawn his permission to remain, and that he will depart at once?'

"'I am charmed to hear it, Mr. Inspector!' I said. But, alas! the same man came later to tell me that Mr. Bunsen had disappeared; and this has made me so nervous that you must not be surprised if you receive a wire from me from Lorenço Marquez, to tell you that I am coming down to Durban in order to ask your mother for a temporary shelter for old Anna and myself. Do you think she will take us in?"

"If ever I lay hands upon that chap again," said Geoff, upon reading this letter, "I'll whip the hound till he can't see out of his eyes. The sneaking, cowardly blackguard! Oh!

why didn't I scrag him while I had the chance!"

He paced the room in fury for a while.

"What shall I do, mother?" he exclaimed—"go back to Johannesburg and see after my poor Vesta? She is alarmed, one can see that; and with that rascal of a fellow at large it is no wonder."

"I think we may expect to see Vesta before long," said Mrs. Bigby; "but in any case you cannot dream of going there or anywhere else at present, for you are only half recovered from your wound. We can telegraph to the bank at Lorenço Marquez—it is a branch of her father's—and ask them to wire her to come down at once."

"Yes," said Geoff, "the very thing! We will!"

But soon after Geoff had despatched his message he received one which had crossed it, telling him that Vesta was already in Lorenço, and would sail at once for Durban. Then Geoff forgot his anxiety and his rage with Bunsen and everything else in the joy of knowing that Vesta was safe and would soon

be in his mother's house and under her protection.

Nevertheless, he had rejoiced a little too soon; for on the following day he received another message from Vesta's friends announcing the departure of her steamer, and adding these disquieting words, "Vesta desired me to tell you Mr. Bunsen is on board."

Geoff raved, almost speechless with fury, on reading this message.

"I shall meet the steamer and I shall kill the hound," he said. "Can I, mother? Shall I not be justified?"

Mrs. Bigby laughed. "My poor Geoff," she said, "you are not fit for taking part in violent scenes; you are a convalescent and ought by rights to be in hospital. Let the man be—he can do Vesta no harm."

"No, mother; he shall *not* be allowed to land here unpunished. I shall take Jack Rosenthal with me, and a horsewhip; if I am still too feeble for a fight, Jack is not, and he shall tackle him for me."

And Mrs. Bigby, finding it useless to attempt to dissuade him, allowed matters to take their own course.

Jack was charmed to enter into Geoff's plans, and the two went together to meet the *Harebell*, the steamer upon which Vesta was expected from Lorenço Marquez.

When the *Harebell* arrived, Vesta and old Anna were standing upon the bridge. Geoff caught a glimpse of Bunsen under the awning at the stern of the vessel; but probably Bunsen also saw him, for he disappeared.

"Keep an eye on the gangway and don't let the rascal get out, while I put Vesta in the trap and send her off," said Geoff. "You'll know which he is: you saw him at that farmhouse in the Free State."

"I'll know him!" said Jack grimly.

Vesta came off the steamer all smiles and rosy delight, but she started upon seeing Geoff more closely.

"My poor Geoff," she exclaimed, almost in tears, "what is the matter? Have you been ill?"

"Yes, Vesta, I have. I'll tell you all about things when I come up home, directly; here's your carriage. Just tell me one thing first: has that rascal worried you on the way here?"

"He didn't have a chance. He spoke to me once or twice, but I turned my back. I put myself under the Captain's protection as soon as I found that he was on board."

Geoff returned to Jack's side a moment later. Bunsen had not appeared, though the passengers were all out.

They went below, but he was not in the saloon.

The steward pointed out his cabin. The door was locked.

"Open the door, Bunsen; I know you're there," said Geoff. "I shall kick the door down if you don't, and the noise will attract spectators. This matter is best kept quiet between ourselves."

Bunsen opened the door; he looked scared and haggard, but he spoke in his usual bravado fashion.

"Ah, I thought so—two to one again!" he said. "You always hunt in pairs, I see, Bigby—safer, isn't it?"

"Look here, Bunsen," said Geoff; "the fewer words that pass between us, the fewer unpleasant things will be said. I've come to speak plainly. You're a contemptible sneak-

ing hound and bully, and I'm sorry I did not shoot you in Johannesburg. So much for the past. Now for the future. You are not going to land here"—

"Oh, indeed!" interrupted Bunsen. "And who says so?"

"I do. You are going on to Cape Town in this vessel; at Cape Town you will tranship into the first English steamer. My friend here—the gentleman with the horsewhip—has been kind enough to promise to travel as far as the Cape, and to see you off from that port. His horsewhip goes with him. I may tell you that if it were not that I am still ill and weak from a wound which nearly did for me, *I* should be the one in charge of the whip instead of my friend, and in that case you would not have done so well, to-day, as you are likely to do, if you behave sensibly. Your passage to England shall be paid for you."

Bunsen raved and swore, and vowed by all the saints that he would land here and stay here, and do as he pleased generally, in spite of all the cocksure Bigbys that ever swaggered.

But Geoff dispassionately pointed out that if he were to land here and the story of his doings in Johannesburg were to get known, — as they assuredly would, — there were at least two counts upon which he would undoubtedly be lynched.

This seemed to frighten Mr. Bunsen, and in the end he sulkily consented to do as Geoff insisted.

"As it happens, I meant to go to England all along," he said, "or I wouldn't agree, don't flatter yourself."

And so he went, Jack accompanying him to Cape Town and seeing him safely away. Bunsen's last exploit was to borrow a ten-pound note from his escort.

And here, for the present, we may leave our friends. They are all well as I lay down my pen, though at this moment the war is still raging, and they are in the thick of it and doing good service. It may be my privilege, one day, to tell you more about them and of the special distinction which they are earning, but for the present the object of this narrative is attained; and you,

kind reader, must be absolved from further anxiety for the welfare of the English lads in whom you have learned, I hope, to feel an interest. By the time you read these words the war will, let us hope, be over, and gloriously over; for already the Veteran General who has so splendidly guided the destinies of our armies, has marched his brave fellows through Bloemfontein into Pretoria. Hugh was among his troops as they rode from Bloemfontein to Kroonstad, passing within a mile or two of Marta's home; and he has been heard to declare that in all his campaigning he never met with any tract of country half so difficult to traverse as that portion of this particular march when the white wall of a certain farmhouse was just visible, nestling at the foot of a wooded hillside. . . . However, he will find it an easy ride when the war is over, and he may take a rest where he will!

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